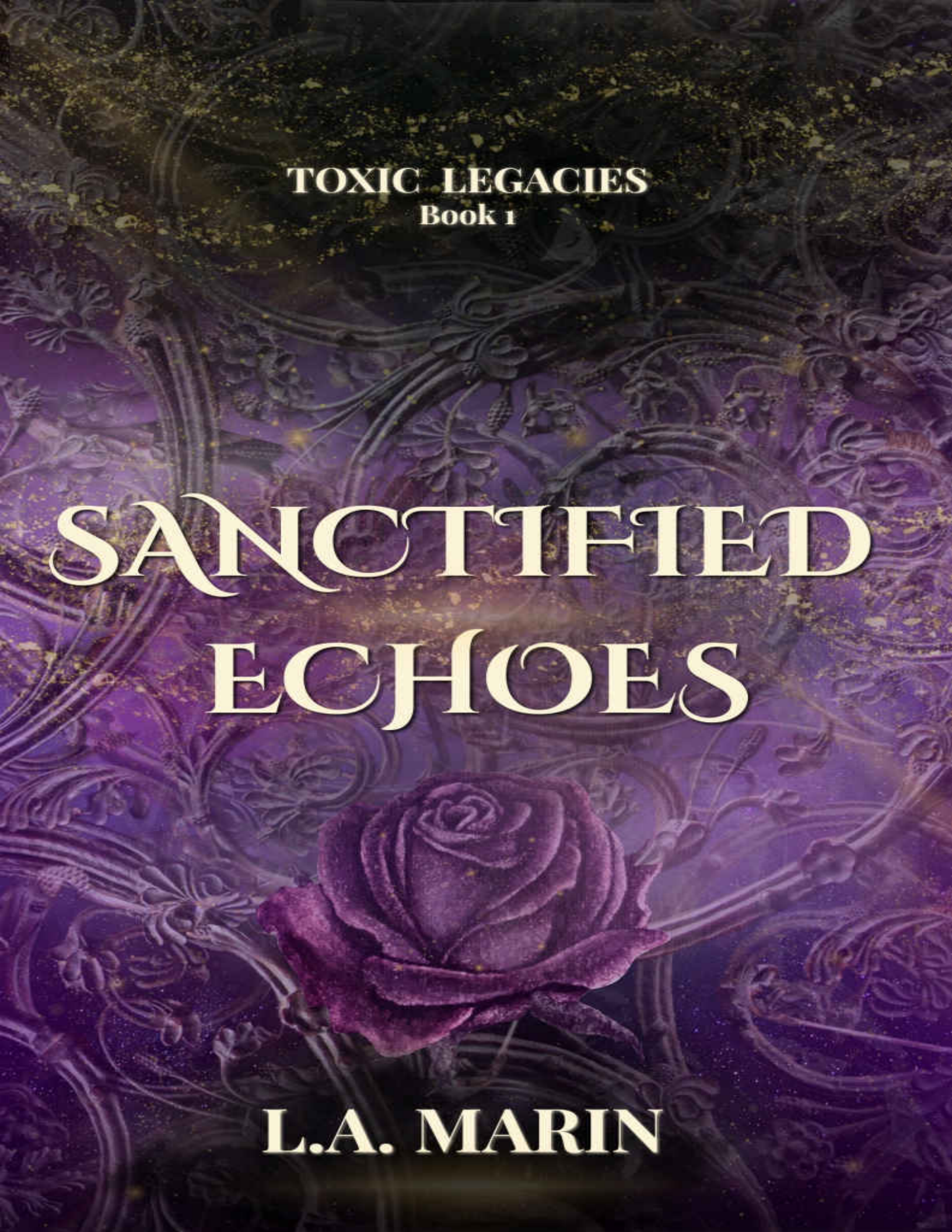
TOXIC LEGACIES
Book 1

# SANCTIFIED ECHOES



L.A. MARIN

# SANCTIFIED ECHOES

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For the ones who know that love is the most exquisite ruin.

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About the author

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## Trigger & Content Warnings

Sanctified Echoes is a dark academy why-choose romance intended for mature readers (18+). It contains themes and content that may be triggering for some.

- Abuse (parental, physical, and emotional)
- Assault by a parent (graphic scene)
- BDSM / dom-sub dynamics (consensual)
- Blood and gore
- Captivity and imprisonment
- Child death and resurrection (on-page)
- Cursed objects and ritualistic injury
- Dark magic and necromancy
- Death and resurrection of the main character (on-page)
- Death threats and political manipulation
- Explicit sexual content (MF, MFM)
- Grief, loss, and trauma
- Jealousy, obsession, and possessiveness

• Language (strong/profane)
• Mythological and religious elements
• Power-imbalanced relationships (with FMC agency preserved)
• PTSD responses
• Stalking
• Transformation (gargoyle shift, vampiric feeding)
• Violence (graphic physical, battles, blood)

Your mental health matters. Please read responsibly.

**A Note to Readers**

Every effort has been made to ensure this book is as clean and polished as possible. Still, small mistakes can sometimes slip through. If you spot a typo or formatting issue, please report it here.

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# 1

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## CELESTE

Ridiculous. Completely fucking ridiculous. Who still throws prisoners into stone cells in this day and age? Last I checked, the Middle Ages were over. Then again, progress has never been a priority in our world.

The cell is carved from stone, cold and damp, swallowed in shadows. A single weak light spills in from the hallway, barely illuminating the floor. I'm trembling. My skin prickles with goosebumps, and the skimpy work uniform—a short skirt and cropped top—offers no protection from the sharp Alaskan chill, even though it's late August.

It's what I wore the night they caught me. Or maybe it was last night. In this place, time slips out of reach.

The team that captured me moved with eerie silence, as if they had rehearsed it a hundred times. Not a word. No hesitation. Just swift, mechanical precision. One of them snatched the phone from my hand and crushed it beneath his boot, slow and deliberate, as if he wanted me to hear hope die. Maybe it was policy. Or maybe they enjoyed it. Either way, they severed my last tie to the outside world with a satisfying crunch.

Not that it would have mattered. Human police are useless when REAPER is involved.

*Rapid Extraction and Apprehension of Paranormal Entities and Rogues.*

They don’t show up unless you’ve become a threat—when someone like me starts disturbing the careful quiet the supernatural world depends on. Or, in my case, when you make the mistake of using your power instead of pretending you never had any.

Their commander was massive, broad-shouldered, and calm in a way that chilled me more than any aggression ever could. He wasn’t angry. He didn’t need to be. There was satisfaction in the way he watched me fall. No warnings. No wasted words. Just action.

He didn’t care that I never stood a chance. I’m barely 145 pounds, exhausted, dressed like a club waitress, and already running on fumes. He looked as if he had been carved from stone. Trained. Deadly. Focused.

One hit was all it took. Sharp, controlled, and devoid of emotion.

In the world I come from, I'm nothing special. Not yet. No strength, no speed, no hidden claws to tear myself out of this mess. Just a witch with dormant magic and a bloodline that should have meant more.

I’m a hybrid without a future, a necromancer whose gift has always been faint. Useless.

But time is slipping away. By the time I turn twenty-five, if I’m still breathing, I’ll be forced to face the Awakening. A ritual masked as tradition, but everyone knows it’s a transformation that leaves scars far deeper than any knife. I know I have to do it, but the very thought tightens my chest and sends shivers crawling down my spine.

So I ran.

I built a life out of lies, tucked into the chaos of New York. I worked nights in loud clubs, faded into the background, and kept my head down. I lived like I was human. I tried to forget what I was. Who I was.

But the truth has a way of catching up. And yesterday, everything fell apart.

For the first time in my life, I used my magic. The memory still makes my blood run cold.

*A drunk driver. A red light. An intersection.*

*A little boy, no older than ten, was laughing beside his mother with a melting ice cream cone in hand. She walked ahead. He dropped the cone. Bent to pick it up. And the car came tearing around the corner like a bullet.*

*I saw everything. The driver didn't. He never hit the brakes.*

*I was headed to work. No plan. No thoughts. Just instinct.*

*I bolted into the street, dropped to my knees beside the boy. He wasn't breathing. His mother stood frozen. I began CPR, shouting for her to call 911.*

*Then it hit me.*

*A cold so deep it burned. At first, I thought it was shock. But then I knew.*

*It wasn't the cold. It was him.*

*I felt his soul. Slipping. Unraveling. Leaving his body like mist. And something inside me, something old and long-forgotten, came alive.*

*He was dying.*

*No. He was already gone. His body lay still on the pavement. His eyes open. His chest unmoving. Blood pooled beneath his head, dark and far too much.*

*I should have run. I wanted to. But my body refused. Something else took over.*

*The air shimmered around him, and I saw it. A flicker of light rising from his chest, shaped like him but brighter. Fragile. Drifting. His soul.*

*I didn't question it. I just knew.*

*My heart pounded. My throat burned. I reached for him, whispering the only words that came.*

*"Don't go."*

*The voice wasn't mine. It came from deep within, older than memory.*

*Power flared through me, raw and untamed, licking through my veins like fire.*

*The soul wavered. Then tugged upward, resisting.*

*I screamed without sound. My magic answered, invisible and fierce, wrapping around him like chains spun from grief and instinct.*

*He fought. Goddess, he fought. His soul did not want to return.*

*But I held on. I begged. I commanded. And the world answered.*

*With a sound I only felt, his soul snapped back.*

*His body jerked. Air rushed into his lungs. He gasped, loud and broken, his wide eyes locking onto mine.*

*And I just knelt there, shaking. Staring.*

What did I just do?

I am so completely screwed.

***

I'm pulled from the spiral of memory by the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Heavy. Measured. Unhurried. The sound vibrates through the stone, turning every second into a stretch of dread.

I can barely breathe. The cell feels smaller, colder.

Then I hear his voice, smooth and sharp, like a knife hidden behind silk.

“Celeste. I didn’t expect our reunion to look quite like this.”

He steps into view. Tall. Solid. His hair tousled over his forehead. The same silver stare I remember before blacking out.

I recognize him now. The commander. The one who brought me down, as if it cost him nothing.

I narrow my eyes. “Do you always greet people by throwing them to the ground, or am I just the lucky one?”

His mouth curves into a slow, confident grin. “You don’t exactly strike me as someone expecting hospitality.”

“And you don’t strike me as someone capable of offering it.”

He walks up to the bars, expression unreadable. “One night in a cell, and you’ve already sharpened your tongue.”

He studies me like I’m a puzzle he intends to break. His voice shifts, colder now.

“Your father has torn apart cities looking for you. Interrogated anyone who might have helped. Seven years, and this is where you end up.”

I say nothing. Let him hear the silence.

“You really thought you could disappear? Hide in plain sight? Selling yourself to the highest bidder while the world bled looking for you?”

His gaze lingers on my tattered clothes, on the grime, on the mess I’ve become.

“People have suffered because of your choices. Servants. Mentors. Friends. This is only the beginning.”

I lift my chin. “You don’t know a damn thing about me.”

“I know enough.”

“No. You know what my father told you.”

His jaw tightens. “Then tell me your version. Make me understand why he destroyed lives because of you.”

I hold his stare. “Because he’s afraid of what I’ll become.”

He leans in. The space between us crackles. “Try again.”

I smile slowly, letting him see the cruelty in it. “You wouldn’t survive the truth.”

His eyes narrow. “Try me.”

We stare at each other in silence. There is no weakness in me now. Nothing for him to exploit.

He straightens, cold and deliberate, a man used to winning every battle.

Just not this one.

“Very well,” he says, voice like ice. “You want a war, Celeste? You’ll get one.”

I step forward until I’m just shy of the bars. My voice is calm, but my smile is sharp. “Good. I was getting bored.”

His expression hardens. He turns without another word and walks to the door. At the threshold, he stops.

“Time isn’t on your side.”

The door slams shut behind him.

I wait until his footsteps fade, then call after him.

“You never told me your name, you brute!”

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# 2

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## CELESTE

All night, my dreams haunt me. Not friendly things. Not soft pictures slipping in and out like silk. A storm of scenes crashes through me without mercy. Some are close enough to the truth that they cut. Others are absurd in ways that still bruise.

Sleep in this cell is not sleep. It is another trial, and I fail it again and again until the dark finally thins.

I open my eyes because there is no peace left to find.

The air is cold enough to sting. Wet stone presses its smell into everything, sour and metallic, like old coins clenched too long in a fist. Light spills weakly from the corridor, sketching the cot, the bars, the corners where moisture crawls. The mattress beneath me feels like penance, a thin sheet stretched over punishment. Springs bite into my skin. My hips throb. My shoulders ache with the dull, lingering pain of someone who has held themselves together too long.

I draw my knees to my chest, press my elbows to them, and rest my forehead against my knees. *Think*. There has to be a crack somewhere. A

loose brick. A careless oversight. Some rule I can still break.

Nothing answers but the drip of water beyond the door.

There is no way out. Not this way. Not today.

Bitterness rises on my tongue. To a stranger, my running must have looked childish. Reckless. The spoiled girl who fled on the night she turned eighteen, slipping away while the orchestra still played, while champagne foamed, while her father's hand branded her shoulder.

I would do it again. Every time I am given the chance.

The memory hits me, sharp and clear. The party. Chandeliers flinging stars across marble. Faces turned and smiling, all of them taking measure. The dress that never belonged to me. The tiara biting into my scalp. My father's voice in my ear, warm only in the way that left me colder. Every word already chosen. Every step sewn tight and wrapped in silk. Smile. Dance. Marry well. Serve the Nightmoor name. Serve him.

I chose an alley and a stolen coat over all of it.

It hurt. Goddess, it hurt. You don't leave velvet and wake up knowing how to survive. You learn with your hands, your knees, your pride. You trade perfume for bleach and subway rot. You learn the worth of a dollar and how to fold it under your tongue when the wrong man leans too close. You learn to disappear in neon and bass, to slide plates, to smile just enough, to keep your head down until the night lets you go.

New York welcomed me the way it welcomes everyone. Then it pretended it never knew me once I was gone.

Seven years of that. Seven years of making myself smaller, harder, invisible. Until I believed I had become human. Then yesterday I tried to be something else. I reached for the power I swore I would never touch, and the world reached back. It saw me. REAPER saw me. And here I am.

The thought settles heavily along my bones. A few months sit between me and twenty-five. The Awakening waits like a blade held politely. They call it a rite. It is a transformation. Pain. It means I will stop pretending. It means the thing I've carried since childhood will be called forward and forced to answer. If I step out breathing, nothing will ever stop me again.

When that day comes, I will put that commander on the ground in the same clean way he put me there. I will look down and watch the truth move through his eyes as he understands we are equal.

The door shrieks open, rust screaming through its hinges. The echo tears down the corridor and back again, splitting my thoughts apart.

He fills the doorway on a tide of cold air.

The commander. The brute.

Even without looking, I feel the shift. The light steadies. The sound thins. His steps carry a weight that isn't his boots alone. He walks like a man who already knows the shape of your next move. Whiskey and vanilla follow him, edged with the scent of Alaskan air.

I push myself upright, spine stacking brick by brick. He will find no tremble in me. Not today.

But I keep looking, unable to stop myself. His uniform hasn't changed from yesterday: black that drinks the light, cargo pants tucked into combat boots, and a fitted shirt stretched over muscle shaped by discipline, not chance. Every line of him speaks of training, of a body honed to endure and strike. His mouth is too full for a face that has weathered blows, the bridge of his nose crooked where it never healed. Jet-black hair falls across his forehead, catching just enough light to sharpen the silver in his eyes until they gleam like molten metal.

He is beautiful as a blade. Gleaming. Precise. Lethal. Not soft. Not safe.

My breath catches anyway. I force it to stay steady. He sees too much.

His gaze hooks me, holds me. For a moment, something sharp flickers across his face, then vanishes, leaving only the promise of it.

“Celeste.” His voice is smooth, honed to precision. “Good morning.” His mouth curls, not with kindness. “I didn’t expect to start my day with you staring at me like I’m a cut of meat. Then again, I shouldn’t be surprised. You’ve survived that way for almost seven years. Seduction as a meal ticket must feel natural to you.”

Fury hits sharp and clean. Fire races through me too fast to stop.

I stand. Not fast, not sloppy. Every muscle obeys. I move to the bars, hands light on the cold iron so I don't wrap them around his throat. My voice stays low, sharp enough to cut.

“Like I told you yesterday, you don’t know me. You don’t know my choices, and you don’t get to twist them into filth to make yourself feel better. If you think I sold my body to survive, you’re wrong. You speak from a place where you’ve never bled the way I have. And even if I had chosen that path, you would still have no right to judge me. You weren’t there. You didn’t carry it. You don’t get to own my scars.”

I lean forward, bars biting my ribs.

“Not you. Not my father. Maybe not even Saeris.”

He’s very good at standing still. Somewhere far down the corridor, a door shuts, the sound sliding around us and fading into silence.

I turn away, drag in a breath that doesn’t taste like stone, remind myself of every reason I left. I loathe men who think their eyes are sharp enough to cut you open and read what spills out. I loathe the way they pass judgment like priests and call it instinct. The worst are the ones who choke on the idea that a woman might know more than they ever will.

He is all of that in one body.

I face him again. “Yesterday, you said you knew me. I don’t even know your name. Try decency.”

A breath escapes him, almost a sigh. “Saint Villin. That’s enough. Curious that the prisoner thinks she’s the one who gets to ask questions. You might be better off recognizing your position and letting me handle the questioning.”

I bite back an eye roll. We both know I’m not here because I stumbled into the wrong alley. My father’s pride has its own gravity. He would have felt what I did yesterday, tugging at his ribs. He would have made the call if REAPER hadn’t.

Villin reads something on my face. “You won’t keep your secret,” he says, certain. “I’ll find out why you ran and why you stayed gone. When I do, there won’t be anywhere left to hide.”

He tips his head, as if listening to another voice. When he looks back, his tone has shifted, heavier, more intimate.

“Your father isn’t available. He has business. He knows you’re back. He knows what comes next.”

The air thickens.

“You’ll attend the Academy,” he says. “Not a choice. An order.”

Every word lands like a physical blow.

“You’ll be placed in my house, under my supervision. You are a flight risk. I don’t leave risks to chance.”

He steps closer. The faint scar on his nose pales in the corridor light. His eyes aren’t cold, they’re exact.

“You don’t get to choose your path yet. Test the fence if you want. It won’t budge.”

“Your house. Your supervision. You want me in a cage and call it order. You want me breathing on your count. A piece on a board while my father plays from the dark. No. I’m not your prisoner, Villin. I stopped being his the night I left.”

I close the space until his warmth brushes mine. “Yes, I ran. Because that house was built on lies and trades made with other people’s blood. If you think I’ll live by rules never written for my safety, you don’t know me. Lock me where you want. Stamp your crest on the door. You won’t take the one thing that is mine—my will. And if you keep me, I will still find a way out.”

The unsaid thrums louder than words. My pulse hammers. The bar beneath my palm is slick with sweat.

He watches. Something like interest flickers and dies. His hand slips into his pocket. Metal flashes. A key skitters across stone, ringing bright.

“Two choices,” he says. “Play by my rules, or learn what it really means to be a prisoner.”

He turns. His boots measure each step. The iron door slams, the echo clawing the walls.

I stare at the key until my eyes blur.

It lies just past my reach, teeth catching the light. Ordinary—that’s the trick. Freedom disguised as something simple. That’s the better trick.

No empires fall in a day. No cages open in one move.

But this isn’t over because he tossed a key.

This is the first move.

The game has begun, and I am ready in a way I never was before. Ready with the steadiness of someone who has run out of places to flee and out of excuses to cradle self-pity. There will be no escape, not this time, not ever.

And yet within that certainty burns the one truth I can claim as mine: I will not bow. I will not break.

Each day will be taken as a rebirth carved from ash. And when the hour of reckoning comes—and it will come—I will meet it with my teeth bared, fighting for the shred of life that is still mine to defend.

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# 3

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## VILLIN

Nothing I do is accidental. Every step, every pause, every word I choose to speak or swallow is a piece placed with care in a game I have spent years perfecting. Order is not a habit. It is the point. Control is the only god I still recognize.

And yet something about her tilts the floor. Not enough to make a man stumble, just enough to make him glance down, unsettled.

Celeste.

She is not fearless. I do not romanticize her. She simply knows where fear belongs. She buries it, turns the weight into fuel. That is rarer than strength. Rarer than beauty. Rarer than bloodlines. Most people never learn it. She learned it before twenty-five, after seven years of running from a life mapped for her like a city grid. She chased liberty without ever tasting it.

I push into my office and shut the door with a final thud. The silence in here is not soft. It’s heavy, deliberate, the kind that presses the mind into clean shape. Exactly as I prefer. It gives me space to think, a place to drown the chaos before it remembers my name.

The room is large, austere. Dark walnut anchors the walls and desk. The furniture is straight lines and function, no filigree to distract the eye. Order before ornament. On the far wall hangs the Academy banner, the twin suns of Elmaris stitched in silver thread that catches light and gives it back colder. Below it, a low bookcase lined with dossiers in strict rows. Some are marked in red. Some are bound with twine. Lives, choices, deaths, and weights other people refuse to carry.

The air is thick with old leather and paper. A sharper note lingers—whiskey aged in oak, with a ghost of vanilla that doesn't belong to any bottle. In the iron ashtray, the last inch of a cigar has gone out, leaving only a metallic whisper. Not for pleasure, but for the silence that follows.

The tall window behind the desk is half veiled, light falling in narrow bars across the polished surface like a map of discipline. On the desk: a thick folder stamped with a plain label—Celeste Nightmoor. Beside it, a half-full tumbler. Next to that, a key identical to the one I dropped on her cell floor. I keep duplicates where I can see them. Not for theater. For the reminder that opening and closing are the same act, judged by the one who holds the key.

There is only one personal object here. A photograph turned face down, its edges worn soft by time. No one asks. No one dares. My father, the only good man I ever knew, lies buried and rotting while I sit in his council seat. As if the mantle of Axis Spire's headmaster weren't shrouded enough, the title of REAPER commander coils around my name like a second grave.

I sit. The leather sighs under my weight. The surveillance monitor hums to life. Cell Three.

Her.

Stillness tells me nothing. The still ones are always calculating. Eyes locked on the key. Of course. That is not bait for fools. It's a fork in the

road. That choice will tell me whether she values gesture over survival, whether she clings to her own rules or lets desperation write new ones.

The truth is simple: I cannot let her lose control again. Her past is more than scandal. It's a live wire. Her running did more than humiliate a father; it pushed a fault line that is still shifting beneath us.

I feel the weight of that bastard's words even here, though miles separated us when he spoke them. He gave me this assignment himself. Not because we are allies. We are peers by rank. Respect did not earn it. History did. And the ghost of what he once represented lingers, even if the man has long since lost the right.

His instructions were a neat contradiction. Do not treat her as a prisoner. But do not forget that she is one.

That is the world we live in. A rebel princess by bloodline. A volatile piece on a board that cannot tolerate volatility.

I lift the glass, turn it until a ring of amber clings to the rim. A sip burns its way down, sharp enough to clear my mind.

What is this game, exactly? Who makes the next move? Who blinks first?

A humorless smile ghosts across my mouth and dies.

Fine, Celeste. Show me how far you are willing to go.

I flip open her file. Pages whisper. Reports stack in orderly lies—accounts of her capture, of the boy breathing when he should not, of damage tallied and hidden. Nothing I did not expect. I read anyway. The stories people tell themselves matter. I need to see where they will crack.

The door opens behind me.

I do not miss entrances. The fact that I just did tightens my jaw. It will not happen again.

“Should I assume everything went the way you hoped with our little fugitive?” Amias’s voice is low, precise. It arrives before he does.

I roll my eyes once, a private indulgence he will count as a victory. I sip, set the glass down, and still do not turn.

“Go to hell,” I say. “From your tone, you already know exactly how defiant our resident princess has decided to be. I assume you spent the afternoon rubbing your crystal globe, or whatever it is you seers do, watching her every step.”

He moves closer without sound. Amias feels the way the air thickens before a storm. He never raises his voice. He rarely touches anything. Somehow, he still fills a room like a thought you cannot push away.

He stands just below my height, but certainty raises him taller. Certainty born of seeing too much and surviving it. His features are elegant, severe. More scholar than soldier. Silver hair cropped close at the sides, longer on top, a deliberate imperfection in a life of precision. Moss-green eyes, clear as wet glass. Sometimes compassion flickers there, but knowledge always wins. He is built for it.

His faint smile fades. His tone cools.

“The lamp gets rubbed,” he says. “But it isn’t real. I don’t choose what I see. And for the last time, I don’t own a crystal ball to spy through. Unlike you, who likely spent the entire day welded to surveillance, I still pretend to respect privacy.”

A quiet shot, aimed to bruise without breaking. He excels at that.

I set the glass aside and finally look at him. He has not changed since the day we swore to the same side, over eighteen years ago, when we began at the Academy. Perhaps his eyes have grown deeper, more haunted. That happens to men who know things they wish they did not.

“Tell me,” I say, a humorless smile brushing my mouth. “When you chose not to warn me about what you saw last week, was that moral purity? Or did you simply enjoy watching me believe I had control?”

He does not answer quickly. He never does. Words are weighed. That is his curse—he sees fragments of what might be, never enough to act with certainty. The gaps eat at him. To most, he looks detached. He is not. He simply cannot afford to show it.

“I didn’t see everything,” he says at last. “Only pieces. I can’t translate every shadow. Do you want to know what happens to you, Villin? Do you want me to say what I see when your name enters my mind?”

I stay silent for a beat.

“No,” I say. “I don’t.”

The honesty surprises even me. I don’t want prophecy crowding out choice. I don’t want to spend months dodging something already walking toward me. I will step where I choose.

Amias exhales. For a breath, he drops the façade. The professor, the Seer, the diplomat. Beneath them is a man carrying his own fatigue.

“It’s harder than it looks,” he says, voice stripped of masks. “Seeing fragments, you can’t stop. Seeing enough to want to act, and knowing that action might shatter the very path you meant to protect. Too many threads. Most of them snap if I touch them. Things have to run their course. Without interference.”

“Welcome to the club,” I answer dryly. Too dry. But the truth between us is never gentle. It doesn’t need to be.

He inclines his head once. The silence that follows is neither comfort nor demand. It simply settles. Familiar and real.

“When do preparations begin for the Ceremony of Resonance?” I ask.

“Tomorrow.”

“Good.” I lean back. “Let’s hope we find our Axis this year. Pressure is mounting. It’s not encouraging to know my future bondmate is likely the age I was when I first learned what I could do. I’m nearly double the usual age for pairing, Amias. Do you see how this ceremony will end?”

The look he gives me carries that maddening flicker of humor he uses when silence is safer than truth. He knows, or thinks he knows. He will not say it. His smirk is restrained, not mockery. Protecting a thread from my weight.

He does not need to answer. Fate is fragile. The future is a net that shifts with every breath. The ceremony can be a rebirth. Or it can end in ruin. It has done both.

His gaze steadies, calm and dangerous, like the sky before lightning. He does not raise his voice. He never has to.

“Be careful with Celeste,” he warns. “Some mistakes cannot be repaired. Not by me. Not by anyone.”

He turns and leaves. The silence he leaves behind is heavier than his words.

I let it stand, then rise and leave the office.

The corridor to the lower levels is vaulted stone, the kind of architecture that pretends time cannot touch it. Columns carry the weight of the castle as if it were nothing. The walls keep their damp and their secrets. The air is not only dark here. It’s a presence, a cloak settling across the shoulders.

They call it a castle. The trainees named it, and the word stuck. Officially, it’s Axis Spire—a black-boned colossus set in Alaska’s spine, hidden in a pocket of wilderness the human world will never touch. Gothic severity

married to technology decades ahead of its time. Light runs in faint veins through stone, pulsing when the structure remembers it is alive.

This is the seat of the Supernatural Council. Our shadow government. The hand that keeps balance between what walks in daylight and what keeps to corners. Every stained-glass window holds images no one remembers correctly. Every corridor has heard choices that changed history. This place is a sanctuary when needed, a tribunal when not. War room. School.

The Academy sprawls like a living system. Some classrooms paneled in carved wood, polished with beeswax and memory. Others, amphitheaters of obsidian that hold voices aloft. Some keep the original stone and let the cold speak. Windows climb from floor to ceiling, staring past the treeline into endless forest. Training grounds hide as gardens, hedges observing duels in silence. Beneath it all, practical and perfectly secure, sit the cells. No windows. No warmth. Walls carved with sigils meant to calm, isolate, and redirect. Lethal beauty.

That is where Celeste waits.

Not as a trophy. Not as a common criminal. As a piece in play, she is held until the board allows her to move.

The door to her corridor opens with a heavy metallic exhale. Stone polished to a sheen. Sigils press against the skin the way weather does, slow and convincing. To mortals, it would feel oppressive. To witches, the law.

She sits when I step into her line of sight. Still again. But not empty. I know the difference.

Amias was right. If I choose wrong—if I treat her as a prisoner instead of someone who belongs to a future I cannot yet see—I will regret it. Not today. Not tomorrow. Eventually, when regret becomes a story I cannot outrun.

Her eyes lift as my shadow falls over her. No surprise. Only cool, measured assessment. She knows she is marked as prey and refuses to act like it.

“It’s time,” I say. Nothing more would be honest.

She rises with quiet certainty. Every motion carries strength. No trace of humiliation lingers; it burned away in the dark. What remains glows from within, catching the cold light like a blade.

For a breath, I wonder what broke in her and what survived. I do not ask. What could I offer in return? Lies about protection. About inevitability. About the virtue of bending when the world insists. Respectable lies.

I keep them to myself.

We walk. At the stairwell, I stop and let one piece of truth rise.

“Play this game well,” I warn. “If you defy it, do it carefully. Your father isn’t the only one worth fearing.”

A hint of a smile touches her mouth. Not fear. Contempt, measured and sharp.

“I don’t fear shadows,” she says. “I only fear I’ll choke on hypocrisy before I get the chance to bring it down.”

That is when I know.

What stands before me is a weapon honed by time and necessity.

And the castle is about to learn her edge.

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# 4

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## CELESTE

The corridors of Axis Spire are colder than I remember. Dark stone stretches in vaults above me, the same austere walls I once traced as a child, yet they no longer feel like prison bars. The dungeon I endured was built to suffocate. These halls breathe differently. They echo with something I can’t name. A phantom comfort. A ghost of the years when I used to run through them unafraid, when I believed walls meant safety and family meant loyalty.

That girl is gone.

I am not naïve anymore. I no longer believe blood is faithful. I no longer believe people can keep their promises.

And yet I am here, in the place I swore never to return, walking corridors that carry both ruin and beginning.

*A voice drifts from beyond a door. My father’s voice. Cold. Precise. More scalpel than sound.*

*“Let it be clear. The portal was not closed out of fear. Nor out of weakness. It was my choice. The only logical one. The war, though real, was*

*mostly a façade."*

*Papers rustle. A chair scrapes. His tone hardens.*

*"I could not leave Elmaris in the hands of a woman ruled by dreams and illusions. Their queen was weak. Her heart, a breach. My Axis brothers were too consumed with honor to see victory. I was the first touched by Saeris. I felt the bond. The rest only felt regret."*

*A short, cutting laugh.*

*"And now… Celeste. The same spark. But sharper. More dangerous. Curiosity will destroy her. If she learns the truth, everything falls. The ritual must be done before she reaches twenty-five. Quietly. Without a trace. Let her death look like an accident. It will be cleaner that way."*

*I freeze.*

*Not out of fear. Out of recognition.*

*That is not a father's voice. That is the voice of a man who burned his own shadow just to stand taller than it.*

*It takes all of me not to throw the door open, not to ask if my mother's madness was his first victory or his first loss paraded as triumph.*

*He was never our pillar. He was our ruin dressed as authority.*

*And I… the last variable he cannot control.*

*If I had doubted before, I don't anymore. This fight isn't my choice. But it will be mine until the end.*

I move, breath locked in my chest, until his voice dissolves into silence. The echo clings to me, but the corridors reclaim themselves, empty and strange.

By the time I step outside, the night air strikes sharply. Alaska's cold seeps through my clothes, biting and honest. Behind me, the castle looms, stained glass spilling fragments of colored light onto the snow-dusted

ground. Ahead, Villin’s hand rests on my arm, guiding me across stone steps toward the courtyard. His grip is steady, not cruel, but the silver in his eyes unsettles me. Fury, regret, restraint—all layered beneath indifference.

Neither of us speaks. The silence is too heavy to share, too measured to break. Each step stretches the distance between who we were and what we must be now.

His house waits beyond the spires. Modest compared to the castle, yet cut from the same Gothic bone: narrow windows, weathered oak doors carved with the twin suns of Elmaris.

“I didn’t expect you to regroup so quickly,” he says at last.

I cut him a look. “I won’t be a puppet. You know that.”

A fleeting smile shadows his face. “I didn’t bring you here to be my prisoner, Celeste.”

“Then why chain me in invisible iron? Perhaps that is what makes me fear you. Or hate you.”

He stops, turns, and fixes me with a stare sharp enough to raise goosebumps. “Be careful what you wish for. In this place, some shadows don’t forget. And their claws are long.”

The warning hangs between us, heavier than his touch. A promise, not a threat.

He ushers me inside. The air tastes of whiskey and smoke softened by vanilla. The walls are lined with heavy wood, paintings in burgundy and navy glare down like ancestors judging me. Persian rugs swallow the sound of my steps. The space is austere, yet warmer than the cells. A refuge that pretends not to be one.

He leads me upstairs and down a narrow hall to a small room. Not luxurious, but not cruel either. A wool blanket, a desk, a lamp with a velvet

shade. He lingers in the doorway, eyes unreadable.

“You won’t like being here,” he says quietly. “But if you want to survive, learn to use these walls as armor, not as a prison.”

I meet his gaze, mistrust burning steady. “I’ll never be your captive. Even if you cage me, my mind remains free.”

His mouth curves in a shadowed smile. “That’s what I want to believe. But be careful. In our world, even minds can be locked. Tomorrow, at seven sharp. Don’t be late. The REAPER schedule and uniform are in the wardrobe. You won’t attend every class. History and training only. We’ll discuss more in the morning.”

He closes the door with a soft click.

I turn slowly, tracing my fingers along the desk, over polished wood. Everything here is chosen with care. Functional, restrained, designed to grant comfort, but never too much.

The wardrobe groans open under my hand. Inside, everything is in order. Clothes folded to perfection. Wool, silk, velvet. Simple, but expensive. A calculated generosity. I brush a dress, a silver shirt. Fabrics whisper against my fingertips like a reminder that someone planned who I should become.

Jewelry glints from a small wooden box. A diamond pendant. Silver bracelet. Earrings. Each one a chess piece, delicate shackles disguised as adornment. On the bottom rail hangs the REAPER uniform: black cargo pants, fitted top, combat boots.

I close the wardrobe and sit on the bed. My chest tightens, not from fear, but from fury. They didn’t bring me here to free me. They brought me to polish me. To display me again in the cage of their choosing.

Exhaustion drags me down. I move toward the adjoining door and open it to find a bathroom gleaming with cold marble and silver veins. A tub carved

into stone. A glass shower. Shelves lined with bottles, scents of lavender, rosemary, smoke, vanilla. Villin's trail.

I catch my reflection in the mirror. Pale skin. Tangled black hair. Brown eyes ringed dark, hollow. A ghost version of myself staring back.

Clothes fall from me in silence. I step beneath the heat of the shower, water scalding away the grit, dirt, and memory. The hiss drowns out the dungeon's whispers. Steam coils around me. Eucalyptus rises from the shampoo, almost the same as I used before everything broke. My throat tightens. Whoever chose this remembered. Or guessed too well. I want to cry, but instead, I stay until the water runs tepid. Until my body feels mine again.

Wrapped in a towel, I leave damp footprints across the marble stone. A long cotton shirt waits folded on the bed. I slip it on, soft and alien against my skin. The bed yawns too wide, too heavy, but the sheets smell of vanilla and whiskey. His scent.

I sink beneath the blanket. Not at peace, but at last…still.

Not free. Not yet.

But alive. And that is enough for a beginning.

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# 5

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## CELESTE

The smell of coffee and bacon pulls me out of the deepest sleep I've had in years. For a stunned few seconds, I don't know where I am. My body feels too heavy, my mind too slow. Then it hits. Villin's house. Right. Fantastic.

I push myself upright, every muscle aching from the wreckage of the last days. My arms stretch overhead, stiff and clumsy, before I drag myself toward the bathroom. He said seven sharp. No clock, no phone, no way of knowing if I'm late. But since he hasn't stormed in yet, I take that as a good sign.

The mirror reflects a pale face. The paleness I expect. The dark hollows beneath my eyes, less so. My brown eyes sting with exhaustion. My hair—dark, tangled, defiant—looks like it waged its own battle while I slept. I dig through the drawer beneath the sink, find a brush, and tame enough chaos to pass. A splash of cold water clears the fog. It isn't much, but it will do.

No makeup, of course. Villin stocked my wardrobe with military precision, but apparently mascara and lipstick don't qualify as essentials.

I strip off the shirt I slept in, toss it onto the bed, and pull on the REAPER uniform. The fabric clings close, tailored too perfectly to be a coincidence. I lace my boots and tie my hair into a high ponytail. Armor of another kind.

The scent of coffee strengthens as I descend the stairs. It's almost tender in its simplicity. Almost. But I know better than to believe caffeine can fix anything waiting below.

The stairs creak like a warning. By the time I reach the kitchen threshold, the smell is thick, warm, and almost comforting. But that isn't what makes me pause.

It's the music.

Rock. Heavy guitar, guttural percussion. Too alive for a morning like this. My brain scrambles to reconcile it with the cold austerity of the house.

Then I see him.

Not Villin.

At the stove stands a stranger. Towering, nearly as tall as Villin, he moves with effortless grace. Raven-black hair catches a blue sheen in the light, falling in untamable strands. His skin is pale, as though he has always favored the moon over the sun.

He wears gray sweatpants and a black shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, revealing forearms etched with black tattoos that twist in hypnotic patterns. He moves with ease, hips swaying to the rhythm as if the music were made for him. Confidence radiates from him, not performed but lived.

"Staring like you've never seen breakfast before," he says without turning, amusement lacing his voice.

I lean against the doorframe, caught between irritation and curiosity. "Not my best state, I admit. Usually I'm not… this hungry."

He turns.

His eyes are pitch-black, rimmed with a faint red gleam. The gaze unsettles and tempts in equal measure. His smile could break vows, and when his lips part, fangs glint white.

Vampire. No mistaking that.

“Andrei,” he says, holding out a mug of coffee as though it’s an offering, or a pact.

“Celeste,” I answer flatly. “And I don’t drink from strangers’ cups.”

“But you eat from strangers’ kitchens?” His brow arches. “The bacon’s nearly done. It would be a shame to waste it. Villin thought you could use a gentler morning.”

Villin’s name drags me back to the present. So this isn’t an intruder. He belongs here—for now.

“And what exactly are you? Reaper? Teacher? Some kind of… bacon therapist?”

“Guest. For the moment. But if my mornings taste better than the stone bastard’s — the stepbrother I never asked for — maybe I’ll stay. “

A shiver slips down my spine. Not fear. Anticipation.

The door opens behind me.

Villin.

He doesn’t need words. His presence is gravity itself. He steps into the kitchen, silent and absolute, wearing a simple black shirt rolled at the sleeves and dark trousers. His body speaks of discipline carved into every line, his silver gaze steady, unreadable.

Andrei tempers his movements instantly. The music still plays, but subdued, as if even the speakers bow.

Villin’s eyes settle on me. Not warm, not cruel. Sharp. Appraising.

“Morning,” I say evenly, voice honed like steel half-drawn.

His mouth twitches. Not a smile. Recognition, nothing more. Then his gaze cuts to Andrei.

“You took my coffee.”

“If you’d been quicker, it would still be yours,” Andrei answers smoothly. “You have guests.”

Villin stops at the counter, measuring me like a variable, not a stranger. His gaze lingers on the uniform. He says nothing, which tells me it meets his standards.

“You’re going to the Academy today,” he says, tone clipped.

My brows lift. “And you?”

“You’ll have a guide. Andrei. He knows the rules. What to say. What not to say.”

“How generous,” I say. “And what will you do? Wrestle your demons while we’re gone?”

Andrei hides a smirk. Villin doesn’t blink.

“You’ve returned to the life laid out for you, Celeste. You don’t need permission. You need discipline.”

“Don’t confuse obedience with resignation. I’m free enough to despise every step of this.”

“Do it quietly. You’ll be watched more than enough.”

The silence is brittle. Andrei breaks it, sliding a plate toward me—bacon and toast.

“Advice?” he says lightly. “Eat. You don’t want to face young Reapers on an empty stomach. They have the instinct for blood and the arrogance of adolescence.”

I take the plate without meeting his eyes. “Protein won’t save me.”

“Maybe not. But it reminds you you’re not just a pawn. You’re a presence. And presences in this world either impose… or they’re erased.”

For the first time, I look at him directly. And in his dark eyes, for a fleeting second, I see a truth no one has ever dared to tell me.

By the time we reach the Academy, the weight of it lingers.

The building rises from the treeline like something pulled out of a forgotten myth. Black stone veined with green, towers like spears clawing the sky, stained glass glittering in rubies, obsidian, and gold. It isn’t made for comfort. It’s made to command.

The oak doors swing open before we reach the steps. Magic. Or expectation.

Students in REAPER black stop mid-motion. Conversations falter. Eyes drag across me like blades. Whispers coil, sharp as needles.

“That’s her.”

“Nightmoor’s daughter.”

“They locked her up, didn’t they?”

“Is it true she—”

I hold my head high. I won’t feed their gossip with a reaction.

Andrei glides through their stares, unbothered. He smiles at girls who nearly drop their books, nods at boys who watch him with something between respect and fear.

“You have an audience,” he murmurs.

“I didn’t ask for one.”

“That makes it more dangerous,” he replies, almost admiring.

Inside, the Academy breathes cold grandeur. Vaulted halls, chandeliers dripping with wax, the scent of parchment, iron, and roses clinging to the air. Oil portraits glare from the walls: Reapers, witches, vampires, shifters

—generations lined in solemn power. Almost all men. The imbalance digs like a thorn in my chest.

We stop at the great staircase. Waiting are two figures. A woman, severe, hair twisted into a flawless knot, her uniform sharp as a blade. A man, not much older than me, but with a stillness that radiates danger.

“Welcome, Miss Nightmoor,” the woman says. “I am Katherine, assistant to Headmaster Villin. He charged me with delivering your schedule. Adjusted, of course, to suit… your circumstances. You will share classes with Andrei.”

She hands me a parchment. My mouth curls. “Strange. I thought Headmaster Villin might deliver it himself. Perhaps even mention that he is the headmaster.”

“At the Academy, everyone begins at the bottom,” she says, voice crisp as ice. “Even heirs. Even you. And the Headmaster does not waste time handing out timetables.”

I swallow the retort. Not today. Today, I begin to play.

“I’ll escort her,” the man beside Katherine says smoothly. “It’s her first day. No one should get lost in such a… welcoming place.”

Katherine inclines her head, and the path clears. We take the stairs, murmurs thinning into silence.

The mezzanine presses around us in a dark current of uniforms and stiff shoulders. Eyes catch on me, then flick away; some linger long enough to make the skin between my shoulders tighten. Our escort sets an even pace along a corridor where stained glass spills red and violet across the walls, painting the stone in borrowed blood and twilight. The color climbs our boots and fades with each step, as if the building is testing how much of us it can claim.

He stops at a door ribbed with iron and gestures. “Student wing.”

The words fall with the weight of a sentence. There is nothing to do but cross.

Inside, the hall turns spare and practical, a spine of numbered doors and polished floors. The air hums in a way humans would not notice, a low thrum of wards and old rules that gathers in the bones and makes every breath feel measured. This is where they will count my steps and weigh what I am willing to become.

At the next junction, he glances at Andrei. “You can take her from here.”

He doesn’t wait for agreement. His departure leaves a stillness that clings like a fingerprint, the sense of a presence withdrawing without truly being gone. I do not know his name yet. I intend to.

Andrei tilts his chin toward a narrow stair curling down to the left. “History first. Try not to stab anyone before lunch.”

“I will do my best,” I say, and mean it more than the words suggest.

The classroom greets us with a change in pressure, a subtle stillness that spreads as we enter. Conversations falter mid-syllable, chair legs rasp against wood, the collective attention of the room landing on my skin with a mix of curiosity, skepticism, boredom, and the small sharpness of people who enjoy a spectacle.

At a glance, the room is ordinary. Desks in ordered rows. A great oak table at the front, scarred and burnished by the passing years. The illusion breaks if you linger. Bare stone walls drink the light and return it as a dense quiet. There are no windows, only tall panes of colored glass that leach the morning into a red and smoke-blue wash. The floor holds the only warmth, dark planks scored by the passage of a thousand boots, stories ground into wood grain.

The man from the stairwell passes me and takes his place at the front, fingers resting lightly on the blackened table. His gaze sweeps the room once and finds me.

He is tall, although height is not what fills the space around him. Precision does that. Every movement looks chosen for a reason I cannot see. Pale blond hair with a thread of silver lies close at the sides and longer over the crown, a few strands slipping forward as if they, too, are considering the room. His skin has the winter clarity of a blade in cold sunlight. His eyes are green, the deep kind that lives on wet stone in a forest you would not cross at night.

“We have a new face,” he says. His voice is low and even, the sound traveling with the ease of water finding its course. He does not bother to turn his head. “Celeste Nightmoor. I was informed.”

The silence gathers tighter. I find myself seated in the back row without remembering the steps it took to get there. Andrei’s hand must have guided me; he eases my chair under me with quiet courtesy, and only sits when I do.

A student in front of me shifts and glances back. For a heartbeat, my lungs forget how to work.

He could be Andrei’s mirror if the mirror had its own opinions. The same black eyes rimmed faintly in red. The same high cheeks and sharp jaw. The same surface stillness suggests deep water rather than calm. Differences live in the details. His hair falls in heavy waves to his shoulders, damp enough to mark careless haste; his expression is more severe, an elegance that has never minded being dangerous.

“Do you often stare at strangers?” he asks, voice smooth and tuned low, an edge of amusement catching on the words. “Or is that reserved for

mornings?”

“Only when reality looks like a reflection,” I say, keeping my tone level. “Brother?”

His mouth sets in something that reads like a smile but does not feel like one. “Elias Dragovici. Andrei’s twin. At your disposal, to the extent that I choose.”

Metal taps wood at the front. The sound is clean and decisive, and conversation dies on the spot.

The professor lifts a leather-bound volume capped in dark metal. When he opens it, the pages whisper like wings testing air.

"For those who belong here, we begin where we should." His eyes find mine across the room. "Though I should introduce myself to our new student first. I am Professor Amias White, and today we will discuss the original structure of Elmaris."

He looks up, and his gaze settles on me for a breath that draws itself thin. Not cruel, not kind. Simply exact.

“Elmaris is not a nation,” he continues. “It is not even a civilization in the mortal sense. It’s a pact. An alliance between five founding Houses and one royal House. Beyond hierarchy and kind, the balance is kept by oath.”

He turns the pages with a palm that barely touches the script, letters curved and old, an inked incantation that refuses to fade.

“The five Houses are White, El’Mara—the smallest, Villin, Harkenne, and Velthar. Each carries its own bloodlines, magics, and obligations. Each governs a portion of order. The royal House is Nightmoor. If you imagine history as a straight line, you imagine incorrectly. Here, the past does not sleep. It hides until it is called.”

He draws a network on the board, simple at first, then threaded with symbols and lines. Some of the marks tug at recognition I cannot place, like a memory caught behind glass.

“This term, we will move through three hinge eras,” he says. “The Betrayal of Elmaris. The Fragmentation of the Unified Council and the survival of the Nightmoor line. The formation of the Academy in its present shape.”

The words *betrayal* and *survival* embed themselves in my mind, driven in like nails into bare wood.

Near the end of the hour, he closes the book, and the room feels the shift before he speaks. His eyes return to me, steady as judgment.

“We will see, Celeste Nightmoor, whether you find your place here, or whether this place elects to rewrite you.”

The bell that follows is not a cheerful signal but a deep metallic note pulled from a rusted tower. Chairs scrape again. Voices rise and then thin as people pretend they were not listening.

I am on my feet when a girl’s voice cuts across the room, bright and cold enough to bite.

“So this is the famous Nightmoor,” she says. “I expected more. Perhaps a spine one could actually see.”

The class stills as if commanded. Even the professor pauses mid-motion, though he does not look up.

She is tall and elegant, pretty the way a knife is pretty. Her smile holds no warmth. A bronze snake pin gleams in her hair.

“The royal Nightmoor line,” she goes on. “Or its black sheep. You carry yourself as if we owe you something.”

“I do not recall speaking,” I say.

“That is the point. Your silence shouts louder. It seems like you have no idea what you walked into. The humans must have softened you. Perhaps you forgot our order.”

A few laughs pop and fade. Not many, but enough to mark sides.

“Enough, Cassandra,” Elias says, still facing forward. His tone is flat, the kind that ends things without effort. “It is tedious.”

She cuts him a look that promises the conversation is not done, at least in her head, then snatches her bag and claims the doorway first.

The professor watches her leave, then addresses me with the same calm he gave the lesson. “Do not answer every attack. Sometimes the strongest choice is not to react. Sometimes the right move is to answer well.”

He departs as if the room releases him, the air closing behind him like water.

Andrei remains at my side for a breath longer. He says nothing, yet his gaze weighs me, as if he is trying to read the page beneath the one everyone else is looking at.

“I will manage,” I say. “This is not the first place I have had to fight to stand my ground in.”

“No,” he answers, almost gently. “Here it might be the last.” He lets the warning sit between us, then steps into the flow of bodies and is gone.

The corridor feels colder once the door shuts. Maybe it’s the way attention clings even when backs are turned. I do not see the looks so much as feel them brush the nape of my neck, light as cold fingers.

“Do you make a habit of staying quiet until someone explodes around you?”

Elias slides out of a side archway as if he had been carved there for the purpose of waiting. Hands in his pockets, posture loose, eyes that miss

nothing.

“It’s a survival strategy,” I say. “It works better than you think. At least I think so. I am too tired to waste words.”

He smiles, a small, contained thing that hints at approval without admitting to it. “You will be interesting to watch.”

“That sounds unsettling.”

“It should. Survival here is not only knowing when to say nothing. It is knowing when to speak, and to whom.”

We pass a narrow window that opens over an inner court. Training yards cut lines through the garden. More statues are broken than whole. Beyond the wall, the forest rises and keeps going until it becomes a bruise against the sky.

He slows beside a stone bench and tips his head toward it. “Sit, or keep wandering until someone less patient than me finds you.”

I weigh pride against practicality and sit. The silence that follows feels chosen rather than forced. He turns a dry leaf between his fingers until it crumbles to dust.

“Cassandra went for your throat because you were announced,” he says. “Not for spectacle. For the position. Most arrivals are quiet. Yours was not. That is unusual.”

“How unusual?”

“You were introduced as if you mattered. You do. You are General Nightmoor’s daughter and the last clean thread of royal blood Elmaris still admits to recognizing. Here, if you look like you matter, you become a target. She also knows you are in Villin’s house. Cassandra has watched Villin for a long time. You threaten what she wants.”

I study him. The question I want to ask sounds naïve, so I reach for the sharper one.

“And you. Why bother to warn me?”

One brow lifts. “Maybe I am bored. Maybe I liked the way her face tightened when you refused to play. Or maybe Andrei is inclined to involve himself, and I enjoy controlled chaos. You are chaos, not mapped yet.”

His smile is too smooth to be honest.

“Or perhaps you are a more possessive brother than you pretend,” I say.

He hesitates for the first time, a blink-long pause, then stands and rolls his shoulders as if shrugging off a weight he refuses to name.

“Do not confuse curiosity with care,” he says. “Not in me. Not in the others.”

“And in Andrei?”

He stops in the path, back straight, head angled just enough to let me see the line of his jaw.

“Especially in him.”

He takes the moss-lined walk and disappears into a geometry of arches and shadow, moving like a man who learned long ago to be his own company.

I sit until the chill soaks through cotton and skin and the quiet sounds like a living thing. This is not only about fitting into a new pattern. It's about surviving among predators who know the scent of fear.

I am still bleeding.

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## ELIAS

I do not follow her. I do not look back. I still feel her, though, the way a room keeps the heat of a hand after it has lifted. The silence she leaves behind is the kind that clings.

I lean against the arch until the corridor empties. Cassandra still burns, not with anger but with uncertainty. I saw it in her shoulders, in the crooked smile she forced into place. Hiding fear behind superiority is her favorite trick. It did not win her anything today.

Celeste said almost nothing. That is what made her impossible to ignore.

I wonder if she knows. If she feels it. When she crossed the threshold, the air shifted. When her eyes met mine, something in me answered in a way I do not like. Too fast. Too precise.

She is still learning where she is, not who she is. I know enough to admit there is something. In our world, something is never only instinct.

I push off the stone and head for the far end of the hall. I do not intend to be caught by anything. Not a bond. Not a vision.

If my blood finds a different rhythm in her presence, I will break the beat. I will stop it before rhythm becomes pattern, before pattern hardens into fate.

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# 6

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## CELESTE

“Here you are. I have been looking for you across half the Academy.” Andrei’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts. His tone is calm, almost tender, and the softness of it trails down my spine like cold water. I lift my head from the old stone bench. The courtyard holds its breath beneath the shadow of Axis Spire. The trees here look like they never learned to bloom in summer. Branches knit a gray canopy, and the tower’s silhouette spreads across the flagstones, a quiet reminder that order lives above everything.

“I thought you might have slipped past the wards and teleported somewhere civilized,” he says, playful tone balanced just on the safe side of sincere. “A place where the calendar and the weather are not at war.”

“If I could get through that cursed barrier,” I say, “I would already be gone. Somewhere with warm sand and a sky that knows how to be blue.”

The joke lands flat. A shadow touches his face. The ghost of a smile disappears, and something darker narrows his gaze.

“Villin was right,” he murmurs. “You are a flight risk.”

The warmth leaves his voice. It turns level, metallic. I frown but keep my mouth shut. In this world, words have weight. Sometimes it’s smarter to leave the blade sheathed.

“Speaking of Villin,” he says, folding his arms, “he asked for you. His office. I am just the courier.”

“First day and I already get an audience with the Headmaster,” I say. “That sounds promising.”

He answers with a noncommittal sound and a small nod toward the archway. I rise and follow. Our footsteps count themselves out on stone, precise and indifferent, the sound of time that refuses to slow for anyone.

We walk the spine of the main corridor. Torches gutter in iron brackets. Wards hum low behind the walls, old rules stitched into the bones of the building. After a while, Andrei speaks again.

“Are you finding your footing,” he asks, “or only pretending to?”

“I am not sure adaptation is my aim,” I say without looking at him. “I am observing. I am memorizing. Then I will decide.”

“That is a refined way to say you do not care.”

“I do care. I do not trust. There is a difference.”

We stop at a door that wears the REAPER sigil like a brand pressed into dark wood. It is the only door I have seen with no handle. It opens from within or to those who know the sequence.

Andrei knocks twice. Waits. Then gives a single knock. A breath later, the lock unseals and the door glides inward without a sound.

Villin stands framed in the light from a tall window. He is dressed in a black shirt and fitted pants, sleeves rolled up neatly at his wrists. Something about the simple look makes him seem more intimidating. Those silver eyes of his sweep over me, sharp and unbothered.

“Come in, Celeste.”

His voice is heavy, like a verdict that has already learned its shape. He inclines his head to Andrei. “You are free for now.”

Andrei leaves without a glance back. The door closes behind me like a period placed with care.

The office is exactly what I expected—and worse for it. Dark woods. No ornament for ornament’s sake. Everything is selected because it works. Nothing extra. Nothing missing. A room that forces you to think or keep quiet. The scent is familiar now: aged whiskey, a hint of vanilla that does not belong to any bottle. High windows pour a cold band of light across the desk. Blood-red velvet is drawn to one side. The broad surface in front of me is empty. Uncomfortably empty. Only a half-full glass sits there, a personal statement left in plain view.

“Please, sit.”

The leather chair takes my shape with a soft sound. It is almost kind, but I do not believe in free kindness.

Villin sits opposite. His chair complains faintly, then settles, as if the wood recognizes what it holds. He gives me a long, unblinking look, the kind that feels like the room is being rearranged inside his head. When he speaks, it is measured.

“Do you know why I called you?”

“I am assuming not for a weather report,” I say. I do not smile. He does not either.

He accepts the answer with a small blink, as if restraint earns a point.

“In a few hours,” he says, “there will be a reconnaissance simulation along the Southern Border. It is an official mobilization. Faculty will observe and grade.”

My breath catches before I can stop it. The Southern Border is not a line on a map. It is history grown wild. A corridor where lost spirits drift and echoes of old wars do not fade. It shelters the sealed portal to Elmaris. Nothing there is ever quiet for long.

“And what does that have to do with me?” I ask.

“It has everything to do with you.” His hands fold on the desk, letting the weight of the words do the work. “Your presence will be observed, tested, and evaluated. By me. By the other instructors. By several REAPER teams.”

“A real mission?” I ask. “As in, people could get hurt?”

“It is a simulation with live elements, controlled but not completely safe.”

I hold my questions to myself. In his office, useless questions feel more dangerous than silence.

He studies me again, carved calm in place. “We need to learn what you become when the boundary thins. Whether you are a catalyst, a danger, or a point of balance.”

I want to ask what those words mean in his mouth, but I do not. His sentences have layers, and the top layer is rarely the answer.

He eases the pressure by changing direction. “Dinner will be served at eight. At the house. Be there, your presence is expected.”

“An official dinner?” I ask, raising a brow.

“More of a gathering.”

One corner of his mouth shifts a fraction. Not a smile. Something like acknowledgment.

Silence settles between us. The room listens. My pulse drums in my fingers—not from fear, but from the sense that every step here is being recorded. Not only as an action. As potential.

Villin stands, and with that, the meeting is over. “I will see you soon, Celeste.”

I give a short nod and rise. The chair releases me with a soft sigh. The scent of whiskey, warm wood, and that stubborn trace of vanilla follows me to the door.

As I step out, a thought roots itself in my mind and refuses to let go. Dinner at eight could be a welcome. Or it could be the beginning of something that does not let you go once you sit at the table.

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## CELESTE

“Assembly. Teams in a semicircle.” Amias doesn’t need to raise his voice. The order carries, and the REAPER trainees fall into place with practiced ease until they form a perfect arc around him. Boots strike the training ground in unison, breath hanging in the late-summer air like pale thread.

I am the flaw in their symmetry. No team. Nowhere belongs to me.

The altar to Saeris stands behind us, built at the seam where the sealed portal takes its breath. Power leaks through the stone in a steady pulse, brushing my spine like a hand I know and don’t know. The call of Elmaris whispers through me—not sound but memory. I feel it in my teeth, in my ribs, in the hollow the last seven years carved inside me.

“Good,” Amias says once the line is set. His eyes catch mine, tip once toward the others, and the message is clear. Join or stand alone. I step in at the edge.

“You’ve heard this called a test,” he goes on. “Treat it like a mission. I won’t soften it for you. You’ll be scored on cooperation and skill. Your gifts

are tools, so are the people next to you.”

A ripple of unease moves down the semicircle. He lets it settle before going on.

“You’ll be transported outside the barrier. You have two hours to return as a full unit. There will be obstacles. I won’t tell you which. I can’t promise no one will be hurt. Dress for what Alaska throws at you, even at the end of summer.”

His gaze sweeps over coats, gloves, and winter layers tucked under black. Then he straightens, reading from a slate.

“Xavier Moore, Clara Carter, Easton Beck, Leonna Cowan. To Headmaster Villin.”

I look up because I hadn’t realized Villin is here. He stands across the field, on the far side of the sealed line, tall and still, the air pulling around him as if it knows his name. On his right waits a massive REAPER in full kit, arms folded. On his left, General Wilson. Councilor. My father’s friend.

He feels me looking. He turns and gives me a warm smile that would convince anyone who didn’t spend her eighteenth birthday listening outside a door while men planned the cleanest way to erase her.

I look away first.

Amias keeps calling names. I listen, but don’t pay attention, until I hear mine.

“Nightmoor. Andrei Dragovici. Elias Dragovici. Blackburn.”

Andrei reaches me first. He meets my eyes for a beat, unreadable, then fixes his stare past my shoulder like he’s counting exits. Elias comes next, every line of his face easing when he stops at my side.

“Celeste,” he says, voice low, not a question and not quite a greeting. Heat prickles at the base of my throat despite the cold.

We wait for the last name. Cassandra Blackburn breaks from the group with a lazy confidence that says she expects the world to step out of her way. Hood up. Mouth curved. She looks us over, and then slows when her eyes land on me.

“This is the team?” she asks, sweet and sharp at once. No one answers.

Two groups blink out under Villin’s raised hand, light rolling from him in a pale ring that lifts the hair on my arms. When the glow fades, the ground where they stood is empty.

We are next. Villin crosses to us in a few long strides. He doesn’t waste words. He lifts his right hand and draws a breath. The dirt under our boots hums. The sealed portal behind me kicks against its chains, and something in me surges toward it so hard my knees nearly collapse.

“Focus,” Elias murmurs. His hand lands on my shoulder. The tremor I hadn’t noticed stops like a flipped switch.

Villin drops his hand.

Cold climbs through my bones, and then the world tilts. Light shifts. Trees close around us, trunks dark with damp, the ground springing underfoot. Late August breathes down the back of my collar, and the forest breathes back.

“Perfect,” Cassandra says. She turns enough to take me in head to toe. “Nothing says adventure like land navigation with a necromancer who looks like she got lost on the way to class.”

I roll my shoulders once. “When was the last time you stood somewhere you couldn’t control?” I ask, quiet enough that it stays between us. “Right. Now.”

Her mouth lifts. “My problem is people who pretend to be larger than they are. And by the way, your vampire guard dogs are very obvious. I won’t

need them.”

A look passes between Andrei and Elias. Small. Weighted. Elias drags a finger along the edge of his hood, the red at his irises flickering like an ember.

“We stay together,” he says. “Not just for the grade.”

Andrei’s attention cuts to me. There’s care there, and something older than care, something he hasn’t named for himself yet. It lands on my skin like warmth.

“Two hours to the line,” he says, voice steady. “Move.”

Cassandra breathes out an exaggerated sigh and steps past me. “Try to keep up with reality, Celeste.”

I let it go.

We push deeper. The forest shifts under us, soft moss giving way to slick rock and broken limbs. Water beads on bare branches and slides down to the collars of our coats. The quiet is not empty. It’s listening.

“Here it starts,” Cassandra says without looking back. Her voice carries like the edge of a blade. “The forest tests. It does not forgive.”

The trees close around us as though they’ve been waiting. Their trunks lean inward, blotting out the sky until the light comes in shards of green and gray. The air thickens with a pulse that doesn’t belong to the weather. It’s low, sour, like breath pulled through a broken flute, and it pushes against my chest until I can’t tell if it’s the forest’s rhythm or my own heartbeat.

Elias shifts closer. His breath brushes the hair at my nape, warm against the damp chill. “Keep your guard up,” he murmurs. The warning threads through me, steadying and sharp all at once, and leaves behind a spark I don’t want to acknowledge.

Andrei takes a half step forward, posture coiled, eyes narrowed on the undergrowth that knots the path ahead. “Celeste,” he says, and my name doesn’t sound like a summons but a warning.

Cassandra doesn’t slow. “Try not to drag us down,” she says, sweet as poison. “I’d hate to watch you fall behind this early.”

I bite my lip and I swallow the reply that rises.

The undergrowth rattles. A hiss slithers through the wet leaves, thin as breath escaping teeth. The sound winds straight into my spine.

Elias’s hand grazes mine, not quite deliberate, not quite accidental. “I’m here.” His voice is quiet enough to vanish in the branches overhead, but it roots me.

Andrei’s stance hardens. His mouth goes flat.

Cassandra’s body answers first. Bone slides beneath skin, brutal in its ease, and then she’s gone. The girl peels away, and the wolf stands in her place, pale and long-limbed, eyes burning with cold light. Her breath smokes. Her claws carve deep lines in the damp earth.

That’s when they appear.

The Shades don’t step out of the forest—they slide free of it, as if the trunks themselves were exhaling. Not smoke, not flesh. Their bodies are slick, black, edges flickering like wet silk, and where eyes should be, blue points smolder. The nearest one ripples forward, moving as though the air itself is water, and we are already drowning.

“They’re not animals,” Elias says, voice almost priest-quiet. “They’re pieces of the war that broke Elmaris. Pain that learned to move. What slipped through the portal and never found its way back.”

Andrei doesn’t wait. He breaks left, colliding with the first shade like he means to tear a hole in the night. His hands shift when they need to. Claws

flash, not human, cutting into the body, but the creature reforms, slick as oil. A tendril snaps across his forearm. The wound blooms open to the elbow, blood hot in the cold.

The copper hits my tongue before I know why. Panic spikes. I am not trained for this. I am not enough. The forest tips, the light narrows, and every reason I don't belong crashes in at once.

My hands rise without asking me. Heat floods into my palms, thin and pale, hardly light at all. It spills across Andrei's torn skin like water. The blood slows. The edges of the wound knit. The lines of pain ease from his face.

The shade shudders and jerks back as if my touch burned it. The others hesitate, their fluid shapes tightening like rope in a storm.

Elias's eyes lock on mine, then Andrei's. Shock flickers there, then relief, and something else. Recognition.

"Who told you you weren't ready?" His voice is so soft it almost breaks apart in the branches. "There's more in you than you're willing to see."

Cassandra shifts back into herself in a quick, ugly snap of bone. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, eyes glittering with something between amusement and disdain.

"Save the poetry for your diary," she says. "The necromancer figured out she can heal. Congratulations. Try doing it again without fainting."

My heart pounds. The cold climbs my spine and then loosens. I plant my boots deeper into the soil.

"I won't be the reason we fail," I say, looking to the ground first, then to them.

Andrei is already binding his arm with a strip of cloth, one hand and his teeth doing the work. He ties it off and straightens, calm radiating from him.

“You won’t,” he says simply. “But you need to learn what you are and how to hold it. Not only for you.”

Elias presses his lips together, but behind them, there’s light. “We’re bound by more than grades and orders.”

Cassandra steps closer than she needs to. Her gaze holds mine, kind as a blade. “Everyone here has their own shadows to fight,” she says. “Doubt will get you killed faster than any creature.”

We stand with nothing but leaves moving overhead and our breath fogging the space between us. The forest listens. The portal hums with a memory, a world away. I hear the call in my bones again, and this time the pull doesn’t scare me. It steadies me.

“Then let’s move,” I say.

We do. The Shades are nowhere in sight, but I can feel them, testing, learning, then thinning when we hit the edge of the barrier’s reach. The ground firms under our boots. My hands shake once and stop.

When the Academy’s wards take us back in, exhaustion hits like a wall. We cross the inner line, and the courtyard opens. Villin stands there already, hands behind his back, coat pulling hard in the wind off the mountains. He doesn’t need to lift his voice.

“You’re late.”

Mud clings to my boots. My throat tastes like iron and pine, and he dares to say we are late. “We made it back.”

“That is not the point.” His eyes move over all of us, marking bruises, counting, calculating. He looks as if he wants to shout.

Elias steps to my shoulder. “The field changed. We adapted.”

“Spare me.” Villin doesn’t blink. “You disobeyed direct orders.”

Andrei takes a half pace forward, jaw tight. Even hurt, he feels like the calm center inside a storm. “If we hadn’t adapted, you’d be collecting bodies.” He lays out what happened, clean and complete, no embellishment, no plea.

“You shouldn’t have been in that position at all,” Villin snaps. “That wasn’t courage. That was recklessness. You could have all died.”

The words hit where they mean to. Behind the anger, there is something else, quick and bare. Fear. It flashes across his face before he shuts it in.

“We didn’t have the luxury of safety,” I say. It comes out softer than I planned. My voice catches.

His gaze finds mine. “You think recklessness is bravery?” he asks, quieter now. “Is that the lesson here?”

No one answers. The wind moves his coat across his leg.

Elias closes the last inch between us until the heat of him meets the cold riding my skin. “We’re here,” he says, hardly louder than the wind.

Villin’s jaw works. He looks away like the sight of us is something he can’t bear—or something he doesn’t trust himself with.

“No more excuses,” he growls, already turning. “We’ll debrief later. Celeste, home. We have dinner.”

I fall in behind him because my stupid legs will do that before my brain can catch up. The wards hum as we pass back into the halls. The smell of stone, oak, and old smoke folds around us.

I haven’t had time to lay out the pieces of what happened in the forest. The question that keeps circling anyway is simple and impossible.

Why has the power slept until now? Why did it wake the second Andrei bled?

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# 8

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## CELESTE

Steam veils the mirror, softening the edges of my reflection. Heat sinks into my bones, loosening muscles I hadn’t realized were clenched. For a moment, my body yields, but my mind will not. Questions circle again and again, refusing to rest.

How did the Shades slip through if the portal was sealed? They are not native to this side. They belong to Elmaris. The thought of what could have gone wrong today slides a cold finger down my spine and doesn’t care that the bath is hot.

Andrei’s blood on wet leaves won’t leave me. The way my hands moved before I told them to. The power didn’t ask permission. It chose. Maybe it rose because I wanted him safe, and my body listened. Maybe anyone would have done the same in fear. I’m not sure I believe that.

Elias sits at the back of my mind, too. I don’t know him, and at the same time, I do. When he looks at me, something in me answers. It feels like recognition, and it feels ridiculous, and I still can’t shake it.

If I stand in the Resonance Ritual, I want to believe I'd know it in my marrow if my Echo stood across from me. No doubt. No second-guessing.

The thought makes me snort. I gave up dreaming about the ritual at fourteen, back when I still believed in soulmates and storybook endings. My father cured me of that fast. He clipped my wings with a smile, tethered me to reality, and reminded me that fate doesn't care about fairytales. I'm the last Elmarian royal alive. My Echoes—my so-called fated mates—are off-limits. Good little princesses don't chase destiny. They get sold to the highest alliance.

A hard knock makes me jolt and splash. I bite back a yelp.

"Title or no title, you do not keep people waiting," Villin says through the door, voice rough with impatience. "Come out."

Privacy apparently died somewhere between the forest and this house.

"One second." I wrap the first towel I touch and lift the latch. The door opens on him, filling the frame, hair neat, jaw set. Irritation burns in his eyes, and behind it, something that feels like worry, trying not to be seen.

"I assumed you understood what you stepped into," he says. "You do not hide in the steam while the world asks for you."

There's a lot I could say. The woods were not a drill. The Shades weren't supposed to be there, and yet they were. I'm afraid, and I'm not, and both truths live in the same breath. None of that fits in one sentence.

"I know it isn't easy," I say instead. "If I don't learn control, I'll lose people. I won't forgive myself for that."

Something eases in his face. Not much.

"Then show us why you belong. Not only with power. With your will."

He steps back. The door closes on the weight of his challenge.

I dress quickly because I don’t know who is waiting downstairs. Black lace from the shelf, a black silk dress that skims instead of clings. I twist my hair up, leave a few strands loose, and accept that it will have to pass for deliberate.

The jewelry box opens with a soft sigh, velvet giving way to diamonds. A necklace, earrings, and a bracelet that refuses to clasp, no matter how I twist it. I set it back, defeated by the catch.

In the mirror, a thin scratch drags across my cheek, raw against pale skin. I’ve always worn makeup like armor, a shield between me and the eyes that measure too much. Without it, I feel exposed, unfinished, like a blade without its sheath. I leave the scratch as it is. A mark is still a kind of defense.

Power hums under my skin, untouchable, waiting. But I don’t know how to call it on purpose. Not yet.

The hallway smells like bread, heat, and spice. In the dining room, heads turn. Three looks land and hold in different ways.

Elias leans back in his chair as if he owns gravity. Hair loose over his brow, mouth soft with the beginning of a smile, eyes steady and too attentive. Andrei is beside him, posture straightening the second he sees me, focus pulled tight like a drawstring. The look that takes my breath is not theirs.

Amias sits opposite Villin at the far end. Calm on the surface, a storm under the skin. I’ve heard rumors about old blood and older magic, and none of them prepared me for the way he watches me—like I walked into a prophecy he’s been avoiding.

“Easy now,” Elias says. Concern lives under the teasing.

I nod because if I look at him too long, I'll tell him more than I can take back.

"Good, you made it," Andrei says, rolling his shoulder and tipping his chin toward Villin. "We got a ten-minute sermon on responsibility."

I almost smile, but the expression slips when Amias's stare cuts clean through me.

"Your lateness didn't go unnoticed," he says. Melodic and cool. Not a reprimand, not exactly. More like a line drawn.

"My position is still being defined," I answer. "So are the intentions around me."

Andrei turns his head, surprised by the edge. Elias's mouth curves. Amias doesn't move, but the set of his shoulders shifts by a fraction.

The tension at the table has very little to do with time. It feels like standing in a doorway and choosing a room.

"Did the princess enjoy her bath?" Elias asks lightly, eyes sliding to me with a heat that lands on my skin. He grins. He wants me to look. He wants everyone to see me look.

Amias cuts in before I can speak. "We are not staging a play," he says. His tone is even. The look he gives Elias could freeze a river.

"Forgive me," Elias says without an ounce of apology. "I didn't realize you were hungry for applause."

Silence tightens. Amias closes his eyes once, like he's praying for patience. When he opens them, pain sits behind the calm.

"Some things are not games," he says. "Especially when you don't understand the stakes."

"And you do?" Elias asks. He leans in, elbows on the wood table, gaze steady. "You keep your distance from everything, but don't pretend we

haven’t seen how you look at her.”

Amias’s breath stops for a beat. He looks like he’s holding something back. He rises instead, every line controlled.

“If you knew what I see,” he says, voice low and cold, “you’d bite back the words.”

He doesn’t look back. The space he leaves behind hums with leftover charge.

“Don’t take him too seriously,” Elias says after a moment, dragging his chair a little closer. The smile he gives me is smaller than before. “He carries everything he isn’t allowed to say. It eats at him.”

I watch the door Amias used. I don’t understand. I still feel it. There’s more in him than he’ll let any of us touch.

The table is almost empty. The space feels more crowded than any state dinner my father ever made me endure. Villin hasn’t picked up a fork. He sits straight at the head, hands linked, eyes on us like a verdict waiting for a crime to finish.

“What happened on the ground was not a mission,” he says. “It was a controlled exercise. A glamour meant to heighten fear and discord.”

Andrei goes very still. Elias’s face doesn’t change, but something darkens in his gaze.

“No real Shades,” Villin continues. “No real loss. No real blood. That was the intent. What you experienced was not the plan. And I am sorry for that.”

“You like to play with us,” I say before I catch myself. Too sharp. Too fast.

He looks at me as if I were a chess piece that just moved on its own. “The Shades were not part of it,” he responds. “Nor was your ability.”

Cold lifts up my spine. “What are you saying?”

“The healing,” he says, measuring each word. “It is not a trait of any vampire line. There was one exception, thousands of years ago. A royal hybrid. Vampire and witch, just like you. Dual manifestation. Healing and second sight. Singular. Until now.”

Elias tips his head the smallest amount, watching me like a witness, not a friend. Andrei is the one who speaks.

“What does that mean for her?”

“It means she has until twenty-five to learn control,” Villin says. “At that point, the vampiric gene fully activates. Her emotions will sharpen. Desire may become obsession. Bonds formed now can turn dangerous. For her. For you.” He glances between them. “She will stand in the Resonance Hall. Train your hearts for disappointment.”

Elias’s attention slides to Andrei and back. Neither of them speaks. The silence between them feels older than either of us.

I lace my fingers under the table and press into my knees until the sting gives me something solid. “And if I fail?”

He doesn’t answer right away. He tips his head back, closes his eyes once, and pins me with his gaze.

“Then the world will pay for it,” he says. “We do not plan for that outcome. We prepare you. At any cost.”

He stands. The chair legs scrape the wood flooring. He stops beside me and holds my gaze for a final second.

“Tomorrow night we begin. Personal training. With me.”

The knowledge of what’s coming coils in my chest, heavier than the room itself.

The door shuts behind him. Silence falls, dense and expectant, as if the walls are holding their breath.

Andrei sinks into the chair, shoulders easing, eyes distant. He gives me a faint smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "So," he murmurs, voice almost amused, "just another night at the Academy."

Elias laughs once, no humor in it. "You need rest," he says, voice low and steady. "If you dream, come find me."

My pulse jumps. I look at Elias. I look at Andrei. The truth sits where I can finally see it.

The choice will not be simple. It will not be fair.

It will be mine.

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# 9

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## CELESTE

The day at the Academy runs the same rutted track as yesterday. One class with Amias. Cassandra’s bored cruelty, barb after barb. Andrei is hovering in quiet orbit. Elias is leaning into every pause with a smile that dares me to play along.

My head isn’t cooperating. The halls are crowded, but the corner inside me stays empty. I want a place where I can say everything without being punished for it. Before I ran, my life was a charade. Smile. Glide. Bleed in silence. I don’t want to go back to that girl who measured every word against someone else’s comfort.

The first person to shake something wild and honest loose in me was Villin. Near him, the filter slips. I should learn to keep my mouth shut around a man like that. I have never been good at making wise choices.

I cut through the lower wing toward the training hall. The stone floor holds the day’s cold and sends it up through my boots. This room is larger than I remember, long and spare, the kind of space sound doesn’t cross without permission. Mirrors climb from floor to ceiling along the right wall,

catching a thin wash of red from the stained glass opposite. At the far end, the armory gleams with strapped hilts and careful edges. Blades hang like trophies. Oil and metal sweeten the air. Under it all lies the dry scent of old spells baked into stone.

It’s evening. Classes ended hours ago. The silence feels curated. Either no one uses this room, or being the Headmaster comes with more keys than most.

He is already here.

Villin leans against a pillar near the center, arms folded. He is all clean lines and quiet authority. White shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, black trousers pressed to perfection, dark leather shoes that never seem to scuff. His gaze tracks me without moving. He weighs my steps, the set of my shoulders, the rhythm of my breath. It lands heavier than a shout.

“You’re late,” he says at last, still not quite looking at me.

“Two minutes,” I answer, keeping my voice even.

“Two minutes can mean life or death in a field, Celeste.”

He doesn’t raise his voice. He doesn’t need to. The space between his words does the work.

“If you brought me here to moralize, I can go,” I say, tipping my chin up. “If you’re going to teach me how to control this, I’m listening.”

A shadow flickers across his face. For a second, it looks almost like approval. He pushes off the pillar and steps into the middle of the room. When he moves, the air shifts with him.

“Tonight we try your healing again,” he says. “On purpose. No panic. No emotion running the reins.”

“You think I haven’t tried?” The memory hits hard. Andrei’s blood on wet leaves. The way my chest locked when I thought he might stop breathing.

Power ripping through me like a flood I never called.

“Not enough,” Villin says. “You did it in the field. That means you can. We find your trigger and teach you to use it.”

Tension pulls across the back of my neck. I swallow. “What do you want me to do?”

“Close your eyes.”

He comes closer. Heat crackles between us, steady and uninvited. I breathe in before I can stop myself. He smells like whiskey touched by vanilla and something clean that has no name. The scent hits a memory I don’t have.

“Think of him,” Villin says. “The moment you believed you would lose him. What you felt.”

A dull ache opens under my ribs. Fear. Refusal. A need that had nothing to do with logic. I reach for the shape of it. It slips away like water through fingers.

“I feel it,” I say, jaw tight. “But it’s thin. It’s only the echo, not the thing. It isn’t enough.”

He exhales. The sound is a decision. Fabric whispers. Steel clicks. I open my eyes in time to see a slim blade in his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“What I have to.”

He draws the edge across his palm. Blood beads and runs in a single clean line. I move without thinking.

“Villin.” My voice hits hard. “What in Saeris’s name are you doing?”

“In the field you answered to pain,” he says, as calm as if he were discussing the weather. “Maybe that is what you need now.”

“You are out of your mind. You cannot cut yourself just to—”

“If this is what works, I do it. You need to focus.”

His face stays neutral, smooth as stone. The corners of his eyes pinch with either pain or annoyance, and I can’t tell which. I am already reaching for him. Heat builds low and pushes up through my skin. The moment my hands cover his wound, something inside me opens. Warmth pours through my palms, dense and soft as summer light. It runs across his skin and sinks deeper. The cut pulls closed under my touch.

He watches me while it happens. No armor. No distance. Just a man standing fully inside my reach. The hum in my hands lingers after the skin is whole. So do his eyes.

“Don’t do that again,” I whisper. The words leave me before I can stop them.

He breathes in and steadies the cuff over his healed palm. The muscle in his jaw flickers. “This isn’t about me,” he says. “It’s about you. What you are. What you’re becoming.”

He says it like he means more than power. The heat coils low and refuses to go.

“You’re not fair,” I say, meeting him head-on. “Not with me. Not with yourself. And not with the way you look at me.”

The air between us tightens. He steps back first. Control slides over his features like a glove being pulled on. He’s careful with his hands now, as if the skin still remembers me.

“Training continues tomorrow,” he says.

“You keep running from answers.” I don’t raise my voice. I don’t need to. “One day you’ll have to stop and face them.”

He doesn’t answer. He turns. The metal door swallows him and throws back a flat echo.

I stand in the center of the room with my palms still warm and my heart refusing to slow down.

What am I? A vampire-witch hybrid, and apparently more than that. Something older braided through. An echo of a story I was never told. He looks at me like he recognizes it. Like he has been waiting for it to surface. Like it scares him.

I should be scared, too. I am a little. Mostly, I am awake.

And when all of it finally rises, when every locked door inside me opens, I do not know who that will make me. I only know this: when Villin stepped forward and bled for it, something in me reached for him as if it had always known the way.

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**10**

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## CELESTE

I'm still trembling from the training with Villin. Or the collision with him. I'm not sure which word fits.

My power keeps answering like it has its own will. If it had happened once, I could have blamed it on a fluke. Twice, in the same kind of moment, with two different people, and the pattern starts to look like intention. Nothing about it feels normal. I don't feel normal.

If I can't name what's happening to me, maybe the library can. Or Amias. Andrei said he lives between those stacks when he can, tucked away from the Academy's constant noise.

I slip through the doors, and the world softens. Warm air, almost still. The smell of old parchment and burnt wax wraps around me like a kept secret. Lamps throw honeyed circles across long tables. Dust hangs in slow spirals. My pulse eases in spite of myself.

He isn't here.

A sigh escapes before I can stop it. I drift to the edge of a reading table, palms pressed to the wood. Villin's face stays with me, refusing to let my

thoughts settle. That cut. My hands on his skin. The way he looked at me without the mask. I rake my fingers through my hair and breathe deep, trying to quiet the mess in my head. If Amias were here, I would ask. Or at least I would try.

“If you're planning to lift a forbidden text, the corner shelf is safer. Fewer eyes.”

The voice rings light, musical, carrying a smile I can hear. I jolt and look up.

A girl perches on a rolling ladder with a book larger than her torso, cradled to her chest. Her hair is a storm of violet washed with cold blue. Curious eyes meet mine without crowding me. She feels steady, like a hearth someone forgot to put out.

“I'm not stealing anything,” I say, more defensive than I intend.

“Everyone says that. Right up until a book bites them.” She grins and glides down the ladder in three quick steps, landing like gravity is merely a suggestion.

“What are you reading?” I ask because the silence between us suddenly feels like it has edges.

“Dreamers. And people who don't know yet what they're dreaming.” She stops in front of me, and the light catches her eyes. Gray threaded with gold, like a storm wrapped in sun. Something otherworldly hums off her skin.

“You have an interesting aura,” she says softly. “Like a note that is almost played.”

My stomach tightens. “You're a seer?”

“Empath,” she chirps, and holds out a hand. “Half empath. Half something I haven't traced yet. Lysandra Valis. Everyone calls me Lys.”

I hesitate, then take her hand. “Celeste.”

“I know.” Her smile warms, not arrogant, just certain. “We're going to get along. I don't know how I know that. I just do.”

A stranger who feels like recognition should be alarming. It isn't. For the first time in days, I feel seen. Not the crown. Not the rumor. Me.

“Keep me company?” she asks, already heading for a round table where the light pools gold. “The invisible librarians are less temperamental when you're not alone.”

A laugh breaks out of me before I can stop it. I nod and sit with her.

Lys trails her fingers over the spine of a heavy volume stamped in gilt. *Soul Vows and the Eternal Resonance.* Coincidence, or not at all.

“I can't wait for the Resonance Ritual,” she says, breath going dreamy as she opens the book. “To feel the call. To know that somewhere there is someone made of the same light and shadow you are.”

She is so open that it disarms me. No calculation. Just longing, spoken without apology.

“Axis?” I ask.

“Yes.” She nods, eyes on the page. “Confirmed last year. They say only the Axis feels the full force of the bond. Our Echoes are mirrors. Not halves, exactly, but something that answers everything you sing. I can't explain it. It's like your heart speaks in a language only they can hear.” She glances up. “You should stand in the Ritual. You feel like an Axis to me.”

I look down at my hands. The truth sits heavy on my tongue and then comes out anyway. “I wasn't allowed. In high school, my father said rituals like that were a weakness. Useless dreams. He told me my role was to choose strategically. Someone powerful. Well placed. Someone who served the Nightmoor line. Not love. Not magic. Just alliance.”

Saying it out loud is like loosening a rope around my heart.

Lys closes the book with care and sets it aside. Her hand finds mine and stays there. Warm and real.

“That isn't life,” she says. “That's a cage with better curtains. You deserve more than that. You deserve someone who sees your heart. Not your crown.”

The words open an old wound and, somehow, heal it at the same time.

Heat pulses through our joined palms. It's small at first, then steady, like two heartbeats finding the same rhythm. Lys's breath catches. Her head whips toward me.

“You felt that?”

The light in the room seems to widen and dim. Dust glitters in the air, softened to gold. The silence gains weight, like something sacred just turned its head.

“What is this?” I whisper, though some deep part of me already knows.

“*Anam Cara*,” she says, voice barely there. “Soul-sister. It happens rarely. It ignores time, blood, and the rules people think matter. It isn't romantic. It is deeper. Pure, even.”

My eyes sting. I have never belonged to anyone or anything that wasn't a duty. This chooses us. Maybe the Goddess chooses through us. Either way, the peace that slides into me is startling. The only thing that scares me is how new it is. A bond I can't catalog. Another power that makes me the odd piece on the board. Maybe I always was.

“Can you feel what I feel?” I whisper.

She nods, smiling through unshed tears. “I feel your fear. You're hurt. And the spine in you that refuses to bend to it. It's beautiful, Celeste. You are beautiful, even where you think you are broken.”

She squeezes both my hands and lets out a shaky laugh. “My soul-sister. I promise you won't be alone again.”

I can't speak. I don't have to. The gold thread between us hums like a truth.

We sink back onto the velvet bench tucked between the high stacks. The quiet turns intimate. Not heavy. Full. I feel her inside me like a steadying hand on my back. For a long time, I just sit in it. Then something else moves under my skin. A flicker of unease, small and sharp. Not mine.

“Lys. Did you get that?”

She nods. “It's like a mirror. Feelings carry. Not thoughts, not exactly. But the weight of them, yes.”

I swallow and try to smile. “What do you think waits for you in the Resonance Ritual?”

She looks past me, gaze going distant. “Fate. Pain. Maybe love. All of it. Or none of it. I don't know.” Then softer: “But if there is someone out there who can feel me the way you just did, it's worth it.”

I squeeze her hand again. The air changes before I can answer. Not with drama. Just a shift in the quiet. A new presence settles, and the room knows.

A shadow crosses our table. I look up.

Amias steps out from between two rows like a thought returning to the front of your mind. He wears black that swallows the light and a waistcoat the color of amethyst. The stitching catches the glow of the lamps and throws it back in pinpricks along the seams. His silver-blond hair is a little undone. His eyes are green the way moss is green in a deep wood, layered and wet and old.

My heart skips a beat. He's beautiful in a way that seems to exist outside of time.

His gaze finds me and holds. Not our hands. Not the shimmer that still hangs in the air around us. Me.

“Celeste,” he says, voice low and even, edges honed by something he never names. “I didn't know you haunted the library at this hour.”

I don't know why I feel unarmed in front of him. “I thought I might find you here,” I say, truth slipping out before I can wrap it.

His mouth curves, but it never reaches his eyes. Something in his posture is pulled tight, like thread on a needle. He looks at Lys for a breath. It's small, that glance, but it measures. It knows.

Lys rises with unhurried grace. Her absence feels like a string loosening its hold. “I'll give you two a moment,” she says, voice gentle but steady. “You know where to find me. Always.”

I send her a grateful look and watch her disappear into the aisles. Her steps make almost no sound on the stone.

The quiet that remains is not empty. It's aware.

“You bonded,” Amias murmurs, eyes still on the space where Lys went.

My brow tightens. “What do you mean?”

“A rare bond. *Anam Cara.*” He shifts his gaze to me. “It doesn't happen easily. Nothing around you happens by accident.”

My breath catches. “You knew?”

He doesn't answer right away. He steps closer, and the smell of books and something masculine moves with him. “Sometimes I see what hasn't happened yet,” he says. “I can't touch it. I can't prevent it. I can't force it into the shape I prefer. Around you, one wrong push could break the future in places I don't know how to mend. It's fragile.”

The ache in his voice lands harder than the words.

“Is it awful,” I ask, “to know and still be unable to change it?”

His eyes find mine. The sorrow there is so vast it feels almost profane to meet it. “It is.”

I want to touch him. Not his skin. The tired place inside him. I want to let him know that I see it. He turns away instead, like habit is stronger than want.

“Good night, Celeste.”

He doesn't leave. He stands with his back to me, between the stacks, like a man arguing quietly with himself. I think he'll vanish into the shadows. He doesn't. He turns back, and there is something in his face I have never seen.

Weariness. Not of the body. Of time.

“Why do you always stop?” I ask. I don't know where the question comes from. It's out before I can be cautious.

His smile is small and bitter. “Because if I came any closer, I might not leave.”

My heart skips a beat. Something in me answers like it has been waiting for exactly this moment. He stands with his arms loose at his sides, as if he is holding himself still by choice and not by need. He looks like someone who has learned to expect nothing and call it survival.

“What did you see?” I whisper. “What keeps you away?”

He fights it. I watch him fight it. His hand lifts and touches the spine of a long-ignored book as if he needs the contact to keep him grounded. “I saw you before you were who you are now,” he says. “I dreamed your name before you spoke it. I saw tears you haven't cried yet. I saw an ending. Or a beginning. Or both.”

I forget how to breathe. “I don't understand.”

“You don't need to. Not yet.” His voice fractures, not loud, just true. “Every choice you make walks a narrow path between ruin and rescue. I'm

bound to watch. Not to move. To burn in silence.”

He takes one step closer. The space between us is small and impossible.Up close, he's taller than I remembered. My head barely reaches his chest. I feel small. Not weak. Human.

“Still,” he whispers, “you are the constant. The only one who…”

He stops. What lives unsaid burns between us. His loneliness grips mine, and I can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

“It isn't fair,” I say. “To know me like this. To understand me. To see me. And for me to know almost nothing about you.”

His eyes close for a moment. “I know.” He opens them again, and they are gentler. “If I told you everything I know, I would steal your chance to love freely. To choose. That would be crueler than silence.”

I raise my hand without thinking and let my fingers brush his forearm. His skin is warm. The hum under it is familiar, like a low chord I've been hearing all day. He shivers.

He looks at me, and the hunger in his eyes is not the kind that devours. It's the kind that has waited a very long time. The kind that learned to be careful. The loneliness is there too, plain as a scar.

“If I could tell you,” he says, barely a breath, “I would. I can't. Not yet.”

My hand stays where it is. He leans in, not quite touching, his forehead lowering toward mine, and the air vibrates.

“Maybe in another life,” he whispers.

“I am here now.”

He opens his eyes. Possibility and despair collide there. “Which is exactly why I cannot be.”

He eases back, and it feels like threads unraveling one by one. Then he is gone.

I stand with my palm still lifted in the air and a tight ache lodged under my sternum. The lamps hum. The stacks keep their counsel. The new gold thread inside me thrums once, steady and kind, like Lys's hand is still in mine.

Amias is gone. The moment is gone with him. It doesn't only hurt him this time.

It hurts me too.

But why? Why does this pull toward him feel so relentless, so insistent? Perhaps my fractured soul recognizes its twin in his, equally shattered and raw. My mind insists it's nonsense, that this is dangerous, impossible. Yet my heart aches in rebellion, longing for every jagged, scattered piece of him, desperate to gather what even he cannot hold.

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# 11

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## AMIAS

History. What is it, really, if not a string of facts elders wrote down and grandmothers braided into songs for their grandchildren? Sometimes it is only that, a whisper folded into time until repetition gives it weight. Sometimes it is a wound no one dared to heal, so they hid it under layers of glory and forgetting.

There is a history of the blade, and of the silence after. A history of kings and of those who betrayed them. Of the hands that built walls, and the ones that learned how to slip past.

And then there is the history you will never find in a book. The kind being written now. In every step along these cold corridors. In every dream you swallow before you sleep. The history of those who never meant to become legends. Or meant to and disappeared anyway.

I watch her when she thinks I’m gone. When she believes the door has closed. She hasn’t learned it yet. I never really leave.

Not from her.

I promised myself I wouldn’t speak to her. I would be a shadow at the edge of her life, nothing more, a guard who keeps distance like a prayer.

Then she said my name. Not in a vision. Not in a prophecy. With her real voice, a little unsteady, curious. It was enough to make me break.

When she asked what I had seen, I almost answered. I almost told her about the futures that rip me open. The thousand ways I lost her. The versions where she dies. The ones where someone betrays her. The ones where she runs from love and from herself. All the dreams that are torn because she chooses someone. Or chooses no one.

All the versions of me who tried to save her and were silenced by the voice that writes fate.

I can’t tell her. The future moves. A careless word is a crack in the mirror that holds the storm at bay.

When her fingers brushed my arm, a cold wave climbed my spine. Not fear. The ache of being seen by her. Not with eyes. With whatever sits deeper than a soul.

No one has ever touched me like that. As if I am real. As if I deserve to be.

She doesn’t know. Not yet. How deep I have seen her. In light and in dark. How beautiful she is when she breaks. Perhaps especially then.

I want to tell her I loved her long before I knew her. That every version of me has fallen for her again and again, no matter how it ended. That wouldn’t be fair. That wouldn’t be her choice. That would be my curse laid over her freedom.

So I leave. Another night. Another sunrise with more knowledge than any man should carry.

Her scent lingers in the library air. Not flowers. Something alive and not reproducible, like a page burned by the sun that still holds the words. When the last echo of her steps fades, I head for my office. Stained glass bleeds color across the floor. Shadows of ruby and violet ripple over the stone, and I walk through them without seeing.

My mind is somewhere else. Some other time. Maybe a thousand other times.

I pass my classroom, shoulder the carved door to my private rooms, and let it fall closed behind me. The moment it shuts, the world loosens. The air thins. Silence seals itself to my skin like a vacuum.

The space between worlds takes me.

Only Seers can stand here. We are not meant to look too long. Even *we* are told to avert our gaze.

It's a chamber with no edges, dark enough to erase form. Paradise is not for the living. Only for the fully gone.

She waits anyway.

The goddess.

Saeris.

She arrives like liquid light gathering itself, eyes bright as a falling star, voice like an echo that remembers the first sound.

"You came again, child of visions. And still you refuse acceptance."

"I can't." My tone is level. Inside, I am burning. "I see and I am bound. You showed her to me. Then you told me not to touch."

Her smile is sorrowful. It makes me want to break something for the relief of it. "I did not show her, so you could have her. I showed her because only you could guard her. You are the eye outside of time, Amias. Not the heart."

“How do I guard her if all I do is watch? How do I warn her when I know what comes, and you have tied my tongue with rules written in the stars.”

“Because it is her choice. Not your prophecy.”

The blade of that truth slides under my ribs and keeps going, aiming for my shattered heart.

“And if she chooses him?” I ask, and I do not speak the name.

She waits a long beat. Fate’s bare feet walk across the quiet. “Then you will keep vigil,” she says at last. “And you will keep burning in silence. Until she sees you with what is deeper than soul. The future is not fixed. It is fluid. I showed you what could be if certain lines align. You are not fixed, Amias. You are a variable. A possibility in a game of chance. The pieces have only just begun to wake.”

Time returns in shards. I fall back into my office, ripped out of Saeris’s realm. My breath catches. Sweat slicks the back of my neck. My temples pound.

I roar.

The sound tears straight through me. I slam the desk. It skids into the wall. Books ride the tremor and spill out, a wave of cracked leather and loose paper. I shove a shelf and hear the wood splinter. Another. A sculpted focus stone on its pedestal bursts into a rain of crystal.

I come apart.

How do I see her every day and keep my mouth shut? How do I watch Elias light her up? How do I watch Andrei look at her like the room is a test he will pass by standing still? How do I watch Villin hold himself so tight he could cut? How do I exist in that space and do nothing?

I can’t.

The door slams open. A tall figure steps through without knocking.

Villin.

He looks at the wreckage, then at me. His face is set in the usual cold mask. His eyes are not. Mercury, when it starts to move.

“It’s the third time this week,” he says, closing the door. “People will start to ask questions.”

“Let them.”

“You know it isn’t that simple.”

I drop into the corner between two broken shelves and press the heel of my hand to my eye until stars dance. I hate this weakness. I hate being the instrument without a hand to hold. I don’t want to be a variable. I want to be beside her.

He comes closer and lowers himself next to me. For a breath, he is not the Headmaster. Not the commander. Not the sentinel carved out of stone.

He is just there.

“Another vision?” His voice cuts clean. He knows.

I nod once.

“Nothing changes,” I say, barely above a whisper. “No matter what I do. She dies. Or someone betrays her. Or she forgets us all. In every version. She is alone. And I can do nothing.”

He exhales and looks older. Maybe he feels it too. Maybe he always has and hid it better.

“Amias. You are not only a witness. You are a catalyst. Do you know what that means? Not being able to intervene doesn’t mean you can’t influence.”

I look at him. I want to believe. How much can you influence a storm without getting dragged into the eye?

“If I only watch,” I say, “I start to lose her.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t watch,” he says at last. “Maybe you should be there. Not as a Seer. Not as the one who knows. As a man.”

My eyes close. The silence returns, yet the stillness between us is deafening.

“What if I destroy her?”

He shrugs, small and terrible. “Or maybe she heals you.”

The room hums on that, as if the walls hold their breath. Tension lives under his calm. He has always kept the lava banked under an old mountain. When it breaks, nothing stops it.

“Amias,” he says softly, almost kind, and it drives the knife deeper. “If you let what you see consume you, you are lost. And she...”

I’m on my feet before he finishes. My hands shake. My heart is beating too fast. “Do not talk about her like you understand.”

He freezes. He lifts his gaze, but doesn’t answer.

“You haven’t seen what I’ve seen.” My voice rusts with anger and helplessness. “You haven’t felt what it is to know she will cry in the dark. That she will call out, and no one will hear. That she will die, Villin. A thousand times in a thousand ways. And I am supposed to watch.”

I take a step toward the mahogany case with gilded edges. My eyes burn. I do not think. In this moment, I’m not a Seer. I’m just a man ripped by what I cannot touch.

I shove it. The case tips and goes down hard. The weight of old knowledge comes down.

For an instant, the air holds still.

Light flares and wraps him.

Villin changes.

His skin hardens to a dark granite sheen. Massive stone wings shear open from his back. His face sharpens into something ancient and severe. A living gargoyle stands in my ruined office, all angles and old power. Fangs lengthen. His eyes take on a demon’s glow.

The bookcase hits and explodes against him. Tomes thud and slide across the floor.

He does not move. He folds the wings away by degrees, and the stone recedes. The man remains. When he looks at me, his eyes burn with something he rarely lets anyone see.

Disappointment.

“You think you’re the only one chosen to carry weight,” he says, voice cool, a fire banked beneath. “You think you’re the only one who sees. I am not blind, Amias.”

I stare at him and taste ash. The anger burns off and leaves behind the more dangerous thing.

Shame.

“Then why don’t you say anything?” I ask, hardly louder than a whisper. “Why do you stand there like nothing can touch you?”

He drags a hand through his hair and looks down at the floor, at the wreckage of wood and paper at our feet. “Because if I let everything I feel out, I will ruin her.”

My head snaps up.

He lifts his gaze. Naked of armor. Naked without a mask. “Celeste is not a piece on a board, Amias. She is sacred fire. And I am built from stone. Imagine what happens if I put my hands on that.”

I do not answer. In this exact second, I understand something I did not before. I am not the only man who carries her inside him like a constellation

he cannot touch.

Two men. Both witnesses. Both quiet.

And between us, a girl who does not yet know what she is.

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# 12

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## CELESTE

Morning light slants through the tall stained glass and spills bands of ruby and blue across the stone floor. The hall smells like coffee, cinnamon, and warm bread. The room hums with voices and clatter, all of it bright and ordinary, yet none of it matches the way I feel inside.

I keep my chin up as I join the breakfast line. Whispers track me. Some cut clean. Some snag. If looks could burn, I'd be a shadow baked into the flagstones. I load a plate with eggs and bacon, pull a shot of espresso, and tip in a splash of milk with a dash of cinnamon. No sugar.

Lys lifts a hand from a quiet table near the back. She glows without trying. I weave through the tables and drop into the chair beside her. My thoughts are still scattered from last night in the library. *Anam Cara*. I never let myself imagine I'd have anything like that. I always wanted a sister, or someone who could carry the weight of my truth without flinching. Wanting it felt childish. Impossible. Then it wasn't.

"Did you sleep at all?" Lys asks, looping a blue-violet strand around her finger.

“Here and there.” I smile. “An improvement.”

“Ready to meet them properly?”

“Meet who?” I start to ask, but I feel them before I see them.

Elias arrives like he owns the room. Relaxed step, easy grin, every movement a little reckless. Andrei’s right behind him, all straight lines and quiet edges.

“What a happy coincidence,” Elias says, stopping at our table. He drops into the chair to my right and props an elbow on the wood. “Or maybe not a coincidence at all.”

His smile warms something in my chest I don’t want to name. Andrei takes the seat across from me. No greeting. Just a steady, assessing look that makes me want to lift my chin higher.

“Elias. Andrei,” Lys says, eyes sparking with mischief. “Officially, this is Celeste. Unofficially, she’s the girl I already adore, and you’ll both make everything unnecessarily complicated.”

Elias laughs. Andrei stirs his coffee with a spoon he doesn’t seem to need.

“I’d say we’re already complicated,” Elias murmurs, eyes on me.

Heat licks at my cheeks. Lys notices, of course.

“And this is Lys,” I add, nudging the attention off me before I do something embarrassing. “We met in the library. It felt… written.”

Lys’s grin turns fond. Then she looks between the brothers, her gaze sharper. “She’s an Axis, like me. When the Resonance Ritual comes, I want us both in the first circle. I want to find our Echoes.”

Elias sobers, interest real. Andrei’s shoulders go tight.

“Sounds ideal,” he says. “What if you don’t like the ones fate hands you?”

“I’ll make them earn it,” Lys answers, sweet as sin.

Elias taps the rim of his cup. “What if fate gets lazy and hands you…me?”

“That would be a tragedy,” Lys says, deadpan, then winks. “For you.”

We laugh. All except Andrei. He leans forward, forearms on the table, and pins me with his gaze.

“And you, Celeste. Are you staying this time, or is this a stop before you run again?”

The question lands like a slap. There is no humor in his tone, only heat.

“I didn’t run.” I hold my chin high. “I survived. And I came back. That wasn’t easy.”

Elias tips toward me, voice low. “See. Braver than we gave you credit for. Or than you gave yourself.”

“Or she moves from one escape to another,” Andrei grits his teeth. “When things get real, she remembers how comfortable life was away from the Academy.”

Anger flickers under my skin. “What do you know about my life?”

“Enough to know a royal heir doesn’t hide in the human world and pretend to be normal. Not if she respects what she was born for.”

Before I can speak and make things worse, Lys cuts in. “Maybe a good leader is shaped by hard choices, not blood.”

“Thank you,” I say, breathing once, hard. I look back at Andrei. “I don’t owe you an explanation. I didn’t return by choice, but I chose to stay. Believe it or don’t.”

Elias scratches his jaw and studies the window.

“I like to think destinies can be rewritten,” he says softly. “Maybe ours too.”

“Destiny is a word people use when they’re afraid to decide,” Andrei snaps. He sits back, folds his arms, but his gaze never leaves my face. “Decide, then live with it.”

Lys laces her fingers around her mug. “Deciding is easy when you’ve never been caged.”

Andrei’s jaw works. He looks away first. The victory doesn’t feel like one.

Across the hall, a burst of laughter flares and dies. Cassandra Blackburn glides past our table with a tray of fruit and something that is mostly sugar and spite. Her eyes flick over me, down to my plate, back up like a blade.

“Breakfast of champions,” she says lightly. “Or martyrs. Hard to tell.”

Elias doesn’t look at her. “Jealousy is unbecoming on you, Cass.”

“Everything is becoming on me,” she says, and moves on, braid swinging, the scent of expensive flowers and colder rooms trailing behind her.

Lys snorts into her coffee. “She wakes up and chooses performance.”

“She wakes up and chooses a target,” Andrei says.

“Good,” I say, cutting a piece of bacon. “Let her aim. It helps me learn where the knives are.”

Elias’s mouth curves. “That’s new.”

“What is?”

“The way you answer,” he says. “You used to smooth things down. Today you cut back.”

“Maybe I got tired of bleeding.”

He toys with the handle of his cup. His voice drops. “About the other day. In the forest.”

Andrei stops pretending to drink and just looks at me.

“I didn’t know I could do that,” I say. “I still don’t know how.”

“You didn’t think,” Andrei says. “You chose.”

“I didn’t choose,” I say, too fast. I steady my breath. “It took me. I saw the blood, and there wasn’t room for anything else.”

“That’s still a choice,” he murmurs, less sharp now. “What you do with what comes for you.”

Elias rubs the bridge of his nose, then rests his chin in his hand. “I meant thank you. In case we were all too busy arguing to say it.”

“You don’t owe me gratitude.”

“Maybe I like owing you things,” he teases, eyes smiling this time.

Lys kicks him under the table. “She likes honesty better.”

He winces, then laughs. “Noted.”

“Andrei,” I ask carefully, “what changed?”

He blinks. “What?”

“You,” I say. “You were different the first day.”

He rolls the spoon between his fingers; it clicks once against the china. “I saw you in the garden. That’s all.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He holds my gaze. Tiredness hides behind the control. “I realized I had been too soft.”

“With me?”

“With everyone,” he adds. “It won’t happen again.”

The words land like a door closing. I feel the echo of it in my ribs. Elias’s hand slides a fraction closer to mine on the table and stops there, a quiet offer.

“You don’t have to prove you’re a blade,” I say to Andrei.

“Someone should,” he says.

“Someone already does,” Lys murmurs. “And sometimes he forgets he’s also a person.”

That pulls a ghost of a smile from me. Andrei’s mouth almost follows, then thinks better of it.

We eat a little, not enough to call it breakfast, enough to give our hands something to do. The clatter rises and falls around us. I try to swallow the eggs around the knot in my throat and fail. The knot isn't fear. It's the memory of a palm cut open without flinching, and the way heat built under my skin like a tide. It's the smell of whiskey and vanilla. It's a door inside a man who looks like stone.

Elias watches me as I stare out the window. "You're somewhere else."

"Just here," I lie.

"You can be both," he says gently.

The door at the far end opens, and the air rights itself. Villin steps in, and the conversation drifts around him without anyone meaning to fall quiet. He doesn't raise his voice.

"I'm glad you're all here," he says, calm and absolute. "Celeste, training right after breakfast."

"So early?" I ask, already bracing.

"Your power doesn't sleep," he explains. "Neither do the Shades. Until your gene fully activates, anything you don't learn can turn on you."

Elias sighs. "How about coffee first?"

"She won't need coffee," Villin growls, eyes on me. "She'll need focus. South courtyard."

He turns to go. The scent of whiskey and vanilla trails in his wake. It has no right to be a comfort. Something in me steps toward it anyway. There is steel in him, and there is a door. I want both. The thought lands low and hot, and I shove it down.

Lys squeezes my hand. "You'll be fine. You'll be incredible."

Elias leans close enough that I feel his warmth. "If he pulls anything questionable, yell. I'll always come."

Andrei stands without a word. He pauses and looks at me once more, and somehow that glance hurts worse than the barbs did.

I gather my plate, drink the last of the coffee, and rise. The stained glass throws a band of red across my wrist as I step away. It looks like a thread pulled taut, bright and thin as a promise.

South courtyard. Training. Truth I might not be ready for.

I go anyway.

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# 13

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## ANDREI

I watch her. Every day. Not like a hunter. More like a witness afraid that if he blinks, he will miss something that never comes back.

Celeste moves through the Academy like a question caught between worlds. There is a held spine there, the kind that looks inherited. There is also a softness she doesn’t perform. In the weeks since she arrived, I have watched her change. Not dramatic. Enough for anyone who bothers to look. I bother.

The bond with Lys is the one thing I did not see coming. It formed fast and deep, like a root that finds water on the first try. I see them in the library with their heads together, trading secrets on stairwells, moving in unison during drills before they even speak. Amias once let me glimpse a vision wrapped in metaphor. He called it a soul-sister bond. I did not understand then. I do now.

Training with Villin is a different story. I watched from the shadows the first time she pulled healing on purpose. Villin cut his palm clean and slowly. She said no. Then she saw the blood and dropped to her knees as if

someone had pulled the ground out from under her. Light ran through her hands, and the wound closed like it had never been there. The look my stepbrother gave her was pride, and something I wanted to throw a knife at. A quiet blaze under ice. It was the second day he pushed her through elemental focus. Fire liked her too much. The flare took the hem of his perfectly pressed trousers. He did not flinch. He never does. He told her to breathe and try again while smoke curled off his cuff.

Then there is Elias. My mirror and my opposite. He treats her like an irresistible problem. Humor. Heat. A carelessness that is not careless at all. She smiles when he is near, even when she wants to pretend she does not. I cannot be angry at him. I cannot stop him. Something still pulls apart in me every time that smile shows up.

Today, in the East Courtyard, a blond second-year named Rhea slid her hand along my forearm while we talked scheduling. Her mouth tilted close enough to brush my cheek. I gave her nothing. I did not send her away either, because over her shoulder I saw Celeste pause. Her eyes narrowed by a breath. She turned and left before it could be anything more. I stood there and let the choice hurt.

At night, I find Elias on the terrace, shoulder against the cold stone, eyes on the treeline. He rolls a leather bracelet between his fingers. He only does that when something gnaws at him.

“Still watching her?” he asks, not looking at me.

“I do not need to watch,” I say, leaning on the rail beside him. “She is everywhere.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I know what you’re thinking. That I should keep my distance. That she is Axis, that the Resonance Ritual will make the call. If you were honest, you’d admit it applies to you, too. You feel it the same.”

“This is not about me,” I keep my voice level. “It is about her. If she steps closer to either of us, she might run again. Or worse, let go completely.”

“What if closeness is the thing that keeps her here?” he says. “What if we’re anchors, not chains?”

I stay silent. It’s not that I have nothing to say. I have too much.

He keeps his eyes on the dark. “What would you do if one day she looks at you and you know you are not the one she chooses. You are in the background. A footnote.”

The question stings.

“I would leave before I have to watch her break.”

He turns his head then. “You really feel something for her.”

“I am not allowed,” I whisper. “Neither are you. We are not her Echoes. Even if we were, the Ritual is a wheel that does not care about our wishes. The Goddess is not playing for us.”

He smiles bitterly. “And yet we are not going to stand aside and let someone else be the one who ruins her.”

The evening bell rings across the stone. The sound hangs and fades. He goes inside without another word, and I follow.

Back in our dorm, I sit on the edge of my bed and let the room go quiet around me. My mind does not follow. I keep hearing her laugh at something Elias says. I keep seeing her hand in Villin’s. I keep seeing her head on Lys’s shoulder. If I do nothing, I lose everything. If I do something, I might lose her anyway.

Sleep comes like a weight. When it takes me, it drops me into a circle of glass. Not protective. Cold. Thin. The circle holds me in place while the world stretches out beyond it, a sky without stars and a horizon that refuses to choose a line.

Celeste stands outside the circle. She gives off a light that burns without heat. It touches everything but me.

Elias stands beside her, brighter than I have ever seen him. His name lives on his brow like scripture. He lifts her hand. The glass around me hums.

I try to shout. My voice turns to static and blows apart. He smiles at her, and it is the kind of soft that makes the ground tilt.

A voice comes from the dark behind me. Clear. Cold. Familiar.

“You are not her Echo.”

Amias. He does not lace it with comfort. He hands me the sentence with a finality that hurts.

“Elias is chosen,” the voice says. “You will stand at the edge. You will be alone.”

An altar pushes up from the earth. A crown rests on it, sharp with light. In its shadow lies a second crown, dented and forgotten. Rage flashes hard and fast. It carries hunger with it. If I could put my hands on fate, I would choke it until it learns my name.

*Why not me*? *Why never me?*

A thousand versions of me slam their shoulders into the glass. It does not crack.

Celeste turns. When she looks at me, she looks out through Elias’s eyes. What lives there does not include me.

Amias’s voice finds me again, softer this time, but no less exact. “Remember this. Those who are not chosen carry the harder part. To be shadow is not to be unseen.”

I wake with my heart taking my ribs apart from the inside. Dawn is a pale line at the window. The room is cold and quiet except for the steady breath across from me.

“Did you sleep?” I ask, forcing my voice even.

Elias lifts his head. “Not much. You?”

“I had a dream.” I pull on my uniform, the motions slower than they need to be. “I was trapped in a circle of glass. You were outside it with Celeste. You were the one. I stood there and watched.”

He crosses his arms and studies my face like he is assessing the damage. “I knew that was eating at you. Maybe that is how it goes. Not everyone stands in the light. Some of us keep the frame steady.”

I stare into the mirror and smooth the line of my collar. “I do not want to be anyone’s shadow. I do not want to be the one who watches and never touches. I am not built to be a second choice.”

He steps closer and starts to sort through his own shirts, as if we haven’t been sharing a room our whole lives. “You are not a second choice. You are my brother. That will not change. No matter what role you take.”

I turn. The truth in his eyes is the one thing that does not tilt. “I am afraid I will lose everything. If I do nothing, I am outside the circle. If I move, I break it.”

He lays a warm hand on my shoulder. “Then fight. Not for what you were assigned. For what you choose.”

If I stop being a witness, I will become the reason everything changes.

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**14**

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## CELESTE

The stained glass in Amias’s classroom throws thin bands of color across the desks. His voice cuts through the noise like a bell dropped into deep water. “Miss Nightmoor, attend. This is an academy, not a holiday.”

Heat climbs my neck. I force an apologetic smile and nod. He watches me longer than he needs to, like he can strip me to the bone with a look, then turns back to the board.

I try to focus, but my mind won’t settle. Training with Villin wrings me out, and my nights have turned into shredded dreams and thoughts that don’t feel like mine. Shades slip from Elmaris through a hairline fracture in the portal. We are supposed to be the wall. We feel like a thin door in a storm.

“The history of ley lines,” Amias says, chalk moving, voice low and steady, the kind that sends shivers down your spine. “Channels that guide transport and destabilize portals if they are poorly mapped.”

His words wash over me, then curl back around, pulled by the rhythm of his voice. He sketches a sigil, turns, and pins me with his gaze. “Celeste. Tell me the source of instability when two power nodes converge.”

His tone is calm, almost neutral, but his eyes carry a challenge. And something I am not supposed to name.

“Not overload,” I say, lifting my chin. “The nodes don’t fail from strain alone. Weak points form where intent falters. Doubt makes the first crack.”

A ripple moves through the room. It isn’t the answer on the page. I don’t care. His mouth twitches like it wants to be a smile. He kills it and keeps teaching.

When he passes through the rows, his fingers brush my shoulder. A touch so light it could be accidental. It isn’t. My breath catches. I hate that it does.

After class, I wait until the crowd thins and set my report on the desk. I turn to leave. His hand closes around mine, warm and sure, gentle but intentional. “Be careful,” he says, almost a whisper. “There are wars that start inside long before anyone hears them. You are the field.”

I hold his gaze. Heat curls through my chest, slow and deliberate. “Maybe,” I murmur. “But even in a bad war, one choice can change everything.”

He lets go, but the brush of his fingers lingers on my skin. My pulse stutters, and my stomach twists. I don’t know who had the upper hand. Maybe neither of us needed one.

I push the thought aside and step into the training hall. Lys moves across the floor, stretching in a rhythm that feels almost like breathing. The room is heavy with stone and shadow, mirrors lining one wall to catch the deep red from high stained-glass windows. Weapons hang at the far end, dark and patient, as if waiting for us to make the first move.

“Ready for Headmaster Villin to drain us dry again?” Lys asks, eyes bright.

“As ready as anyone can be for sanctioned suffering.” I catch the training blade she tosses me and twirl it once to hide the shake in my hands.

Villin waits by a column, sleeves rolled, white shirt open at the throat, black trousers pressed to perfection, shoes polished to a shine. He tracks every movement without moving much at all.

We start with drills. Strike. Block. Roll. Lys moves like a cat that learned choreography. I move like someone trying not to shatter.

“You’re holding back,” Villin says, voice even. “You will not learn by caging it. Do you trust me, Celeste?”

My mouth dries. “I think so.”

“No. Answer.”

“I don’t know if I trust anyone completely.”

He steps in, takes my hand, and places it over his heart. “Then learn what trust feels like. If your power anchors in empathy, read me without fear.”

His heartbeat is steady and fast. Heat under the stone. Control braided with frustration. Something else under that, harder to name. I breathe it in. Vanilla and whiskey thread the air and settle low in my core. It should not be a comfort. It is. I hate how my body leans a fraction closer before I pull it back.

“What do you feel?” he asks.

“Discipline. Pressure. A truth you keep to yourself.”

We hold the moment a beat too long. He steps back, and the space between us snaps taut.

Power work comes next. He warps the air around us, a subtle distortion that vibrates against my teeth. I reach for resonance, catch it, and almost let

it slip. Lys slides to my side. “Heart, not head,” she says, pressing her palm quickly between my shoulder blades. “Find the beat.”

I close my eyes. I listen for my own rhythm and let the field bend to that instead of to my fear. The hum smooths, the distortion eases.

“Better.” Villin gives a single nod. “Still not enough. You will do this when someone is bleeding out at your feet, when you are alone, when you have nothing left. Healing crystals will fail. Your well does not.”

My lungs burn. I hold the line. I do not break.

In the mirror, I catch a shape at the doorway. Andrei. He stands in the shadow and watches, same as always, but there is an edge in him today that wasn’t there before. Old hurt or new anger, I can’t tell. The awareness of him knots up with everything else. Want. Need. Fear. I feel unsteady in a place built for balance.

We finish. My legs are shaking. Lys hooks her arm through mine and drags me to the library’s back alcove, where the light is warm and the air smells like tea and wax. She curls onto a velvet bench with a mug cupped in both hands and looks at me like a conspirator about to commit a crime.

“Fine,” she whispers. “We are going to talk about the dangerously attractive man who trains us.”

I choke on a laugh. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh, come on. Do not tell me you feel nothing when Villin puts your hand over his heart or when Amias looks at you like he is cataloging each breath and filing it in a locked drawer.”

“They are our instructors.”

“They are also men.” Her voice is soft, her grin wicked. “If Villin corrects me in that patient sermon voice one more time, I might kiss him just to shut him up.”

A shiver runs through me at the image. I swallow. “Do you think he’s human?” I ask, low. “Villin.”

“No. That is the problem. He feels like a living statue that could crush you or cradle you with the same hand. Controlled force. It makes you want to understand him and run away at once.”

“Yes.” The word slips out. I feel again the steady thud of his heart under my palm, the question in his voice when he said trust. He pushes me to my limits and then past them. Part of me thinks he is trying to forget something when he does. Maybe he is trying to see if I can carry what he cannot say.

“Amias?” I ask.

Lys tilts her head. “Hardest to read, and the one who seems to know you best. He watches like you are a lost work of art. The second he gets close, he retreats. That is a lonely man.”

I picture him alone in that quiet office, vision-drunk, drowning in futures he cannot touch. The thought sits heavy and strange in my chest.

“And Andrei?”

She blinks, surprised I asked, then smiles. “He is the one who looks when no one else is watching. Walls and sharp words, but there is pain under that. You are the crack in his armor.”

“He hates me.”

“No. He is bracing. He feels a pull, and if he is not chosen, I think a part of him will go quiet for a long time.”

My fingers tremble. I hug my arms tight.

“I did not ask for any of this,” I say. “The stares, the weight, the responsibility. I wanted a life that did not hurt so much to hold.”

Lys shifts closer and takes my hand. Her gaze is gentle and unyielding.

“You are not ordinary, Celeste. You are Axis. You are a link in a chain that is waking up. And what you feel for Elias is yours. Do not let anyone take that.”

I go very still. The word hangs between us.

“What I feel,” I echo. My voice is thin.

“You like him.”

I freeze. She does not blink.

“It isn’t wise,” I whisper.

“I did not ask what is wise. I told you what is true.”

“He is the twin of a man who cannot stand me. He is tied to a ritual that could bind us or break us. And he is Elias.”

Her brow lifts. “You say his name like it is a dangerous object.”

“It is. He is charming without being shallow. He sees things. When he smiles, I want to forget what I am supposed to be.”

“Maybe you do not have to be anything. Maybe you just have to be.”

I look down at our joined hands. “What if his true Axis stands in the first circle at the Ritual, and it isn’t me?”

“Then you still chose. You still felt. You still lived. You will not regret that.”

She leans in, eyes steady. “I am not asking you to drag him into a dark hallway. But he feels something too. You two orbit each other like wolves who cannot decide if they want to bite or lean in.”

A laugh escapes me. It sounds shaky and real. “He pretends nothing matters, so nothing can hurt him when it does. But he commits. To everything.”

“Sounds exactly like the kind of man you could love without noticing when it started,” Lys says, softly.

I mull over her words, then give in. “I like him.”

“You are drawn to him.”

“I am,” I murmur.

“What are you going to do with that?” she asks, conspirator’s smile back.

I slowly breathe in. I am tired of running from my own life. “I will tell him,” I say. “Or I will ask him to meet me tonight. Just us.”

She claps once and muffles it against her cup. “That is my girl.”

“It could be very stupid.”

“Absolutely. Which is why it is worth doing. You cannot live under the weight of what-ifs. Mistakes are better than regrets. Reality is better than imagination.”

I nod. The decision clicks into place. It hurts and it frees me at the same time. “I want to lose myself in something real,” I whisper, trying to hide the waver in my voice. “Even if it hurts.”

“Then tell him. Show him. Whatever happens, we will walk through it. I am here. I am your sister, not by blood, but by choice. Maybe by fate, too. Sometimes choice is the only thing that matters.”

My throat burns. I pull her into a hug and hold on. Something invisible hums between us, a golden thread that does not bind so much as anchor us. “I am here too,” I say, and one tear escapes anyway.

She wipes it with the back of her finger and grins. “Shall we go charm the rebel twin?”

We laugh. The sound sits sweet and sharp on my tongue. We rise and step into the corridor. Light pools on the stone ahead of us. For the first time in days, Elias crosses my mind, and my chest doesn’t seize. Instead, something lighter stirs. Hope is a risk, but I am willing to carry it.

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**15**

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## CELESTE

Night sits heavy over the Spire, the kind that silences even the wind. I slip out of my room and down the stone path that runs from Villin's house to Axis Spire. The air tastes charged, almost metallic, as if the world took a breath and forgot to let it out. We are in Alaska, and October is closing in, but in this pocket, the days and nights keep their own steady rhythm. I try not to think about the power it took to stitch this safe haven into place.

I tell myself I am only walking. That I need air after a day packed too tight with training, whispers, and the kind of attention that makes my shoulders ache. It is not true. The truth walks beside me like a second shadow and knows exactly where I am going.

I find him where I knew he would be—on the East Terrace, the one with the low wall and the long view of the trees. Elias sits on the stone bench, one knee raised, arms draped loosely at his sides, gaze fixed on the dark line of the forest. The wind has ruffled his hair. In this light, his profile

looks softer, younger, though the weary pull at his mouth has not left since that mission. A dark glass bottle waits by his boot.

I pause under the arch and watch him for one beat, maybe two. He does not turn.

“You walk quietly,” he says, easy as if we had been mid-conversation all along. “Silence gives you away.”

He lifts the bottle, takes a slow drink, and sets it back with care. Not whiskey. Blood. It smells metallic, not unpleasant, just honest about what he is.

I cross the terrace and sit at a careful distance away. “And you always know when I am here. That is a little unnerving.”

“Innate talent.” He finally looks at me, one brow lifting. “Or I was waiting.”

Something low in my chest tightens. “Why?”

“Because you ran today.” His gaze does not bite. It holds. “From my eyes. From my hand. From what this is.”

There is no point pretending I do not know what he means. “I ran because I am scared,” I confess. “Of you. Of me. Of what happens if I stop being careful.”

“What happens if you do?” he asks, softly.

I let the answer hit without softening it. “I want to be near you. I want to stop measuring every word. I want to be honest and not come apart.”

He turns fully toward me. No lazy grin, no performance. Just Elias, present in a way that feels like standing on warm ground after a long time in the snow.

“You pull me in,” he says. “Not because you are Axis, not because half the Spire stares when you walk into a room. You pull me when you are

exhausted and forget to hide it. When your voice shakes and you keep going. When you look at a problem, you can see that it can be solved if you just refuse to quit. That is the part I cannot ignore."

Before I can fall into that too far, I stop myself. "I need to ask you something first."

"Ask."

"Why does Andrei treat me like I am a problem he has to remove?"

Elias exhales, elbows braced on his knees, eyes on the tree line again. "He does not hate you. He is built to see risk before possibility. You are an Axis. You stand in the center of a ritual that can rearrange lives, and he knows exactly how much we could lose. He cannot stand the idea that you will be matched to someone else. Or that someone else will choose you. Or that I will."

My heart gives a hard, traitorous kick. "And you. What are you afraid to lose?"

"You," he says, without looking away. "Not in the circle. Day to day."

We sit in silence. The forest hums around us: dry leaves shifting, a distant owl, wind sliding through the pines.

"Villin is your brother," I blurt, though I already know the answer.

"Stepbrother," he says. "He grew up in a sharper world. He is still ours, even when Andrei pretends that part is negotiable." A corner of his mouth moves. "Andrei is ice when he wants to be. Villin is a stone that remembers heat. You walked into the middle of that and kept going."

"Andrei confuses me," I admit. "I can't read what he wants."

"Control." His stare latches onto mine, unyielding. "He wants to set the board and move the pieces. You do not let him. He respects that. It irritates him. It makes him notice you more than is good for him."

I almost laugh, but emotion rises too fast and stops it in my throat. He must see it. Elias stands and offers his hand in a simple, open gesture.

“Come here,” he says.

I take his hand. He draws me up and closer, slow enough to give me a choice. I make it. My forehead finds his shoulder, and the tension in my spine lets go by degrees. He smells like clean cotton and cedar, with the faint iron of the bottle at his feet.

“I am not a hero,” he murmurs near my hair. “I would still like to be good for you.”

He looks at me for a long moment, eyes searching mine. Then, carefully, he leans in. His fingers skim my cheek in a feather-light caress, and a shiver runs through me.

“Elias?” I whisper, my voice unsteady.

“Yeah,” he answers, low.

“Kiss me,” I plead, heat rising under my skin. “Please.”

He pauses for just a second, his eyes flickering down to my lips. Then, slowly, he leans in, his lips hovering just inches from mine.

I can feel the heat of his breath on my skin, the electricity crackling between us. And then, finally, he closes the distance, pressing his lips to mine in a soft, gentle kiss.

It's sweet and tentative at first, a soft brush of skin on skin. But then he deepens it, his tongue sliding into my mouth to tangle with mine. I moan softly into the kiss, my hands coming up to tangle in his hair, pulling him closer.

The night doesn’t vanish. It gets larger and quieter around us, until there’s room for breath again. When we part, we stay close.

“Do you trust me?” I ask. My voice is steady, and I am proud of that.

“More than I have trusted anyone.”

I want to tell him I am not running. I want to promise it out loud. The words are not ready, so I stand there and let my body say it for me by not moving.

The cold finds my ankles and climbs, and still I do not step away. Something inside me tilts like the sea turning under the moon.

“Should I be afraid?” my voice hardly louder than the wind.

“Of me?” He tips his brow to mine. “No. Why would you?”

“Because if you become real to me, everything else will cut deeper,” I say. “When I lose you. Or when I have to choose someone else. The ritual, bloodlines, all of it feels written already. And I do not even know who I am yet.”

His arms tighten. “We talk about destiny like it is a finished book. Maybe it is a map. Maps get revised. Borders shift.”

“You can say that, and mean it, even if you are not my Echo?”

The truth shows in the set of his jaw before he speaks. “If I am not, it will break me,” he says simply. “I will not regret a minute. Because a part of me knows the circle is not the measure. The measure is what you choose when the circle does not name you.”

Courage lives in him without fanfare. He steps toward the fire and hopes to become light. I know it in my bones, and the knowing steadies me.

“I want to know you,” I say. “Not the power. Not the title. You. The man who sits out here and listens to the world until it lets him in.”

“Then I will give you the truth.” He looks down at his hands for a moment. “I am afraid of my brother.”

“Andrei.”

“He feels you the way I do.” He doesn't flinch from it. “He will never admit it until he has to. If he does, I do not know what I will do. I am not sure I can fight him.”

“I do not want to be between you.”

“You do not have a choice,” he says, gentle and honest. “You are there already.” He hesitates, then adds, “And Villin.”

I straighten a little. “Villin.”

“He is not blind,” Elias says. “He does not see you as an assignment. The question is not whether one of us chooses you. It is whether you choose any of us.”

I want to argue, but the truth will not let me. It settles between us like a third presence and waits to be acknowledged.

“It is hard,” I admit. “All of this. I am still figuring out who I am. I do not even fully know myself yet. I just know I have to fight. I have to survive.”

“Then learn yourself,” he says. “If we help, use us. Just do not quit on yourself.”

We slide down and sit on the cold stone with our backs to the wall, shoulders touching. The terrace keeps the wind off. He threads his fingers through mine and leaves them there, a quiet, uncomplicated link.

“Stay with me,” he says.

“I will stay as long as you will have me.”

“Then stay. I am not going anywhere.”

Time relaxes. The trees shift and murmur. Somewhere below, a fox cries and is answered. The bottle sits by his boot, dark and still, and the cold presses closer until our shared warmth becomes its own small shelter.

I think about Andrei’s guarded stare in training, about the way my power surged when Villin bled on purpose and asked me to trust what I am, about

Amias and the gravity of his voice when he said there are wars inside us before there are wars outside. The night collects those thoughts and lays them out in order. None of them feels simple. None of them feels impossible.

“Are you cold?” Elias asks after a while.

“A little.”

He shifts, pulls me in, and I let him. My head finds his shoulder again, easier this time. His breath moves through me like a tide that sets its own pace. I match it without trying.

“Tell me something true,” I say.

“I wanted you to come,” he answers. “I did not know if you would.”

“I almost did not,” I admit. “Then I realized I was already on the path.”

We fall quiet again. The moon climbs. Somewhere inside the Spire, the hour bell lifts and falls, a clear note that makes the night feel ceremonial. If the ritual were tonight, if a circle of power were painted on the stones and names were called, I do not know what I would do, but for the first time, I do not feel paralyzed by the unknown.

“Elias.”

“Hmm.”

“If this ends badly,” I say, and my throat tightens at the thought of it, “I do not want the memory of you to feel like a mistake.”

“It will not,” he says. “You are not a mistake. Neither is this.”

I close my eyes. I have been alone in rooms full of people my whole life. Tonight, the opposite is true. The night is huge and empty, and I am not alone in it. I can feel the shape of my choices even if I cannot see their edges yet.

When the wind freshens and the cold creeps back under my coat, we shift again. This time, I do not second-guess the way I lean into him, and he does not hesitate to take the weight. The stars look close enough to touch. Maybe maps can change. Maybe I can too.

“Stay,” he says once more, quieter now.

“I am here,” I answer.

The words settle. The darkness stretches around us. For a long, ordinary stretch of time, breathing with him is enough.

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**16**

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## ANDREI

The whiskey in Villin’s glass looks like a small fire that forgot how to burn. Mine is almost gone. I don’t remember when I started drinking or why I thought it would help. Each swallow just widens the quiet inside me.

“She went out,” I say, still watching the amber.

Villin sprawls on the leather couch like he owns the night. One eyebrow lifts, the laziest question in the world. “Who?”

“Celeste.”

I pull my jacket off the chair and head for the door.

“I’m following her.”

“Andrei.”

“It’s late. She’s Axis. You don’t know what waits after dark.”

“Maybe it’s your dark that’s waiting,” he says, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smirk.

I don’t answer. The door closes with a long sigh, and the cold bites my face, sharp and almost deserved.

Axis Spire at night isn’t quiet so much as held. The air pauses between breaths. Wet leaves whisper under my boots. I cut along the shadowed side of the buildings and find her on the path, the tilt of her shoulders set like a decision. The coat she chose is too thin for this weather; she doesn’t seem to notice. Her hair moves like it’s carrying light inside it.

*Where are you going, Celeste?*

Then I see him. Elias. When he smiles at her, it’s the first real smile I’ve caught all week.

Something tightens in my chest. I step into the line of a wall and let the stone take my weight. I can’t catch every word. Just pieces. My name. Villin’s. A low laugh. Her voice is warm. His voice steady. Familiar.

And then they kiss.

It hits like a fist to the solar plexus. Not pain. Worse. A tearing quiet. I push back from the wall as if distance could make it nothing. My breath comes out in short bursts. Jealousy tastes metallic; I swallow it down, and it climbs right back up my throat.

I want to step from the dark and rip them out of that small, bright thing they made. Tell him he has no right. Tell her it isn’t fair. Tell the night to rewind. But there were never promises. Only looks that said too much, and the space I put between us because I thought it was safer for her. For me.

My choice. My silence.

I turn away. The walk back feels like dragging a chain over stone. The door to Villin’s living room bangs off the wall, and he looks up before it stops moving, already knowing.

“Well?”

“They kissed.”

His hand stills with the glass halfway up. “Elias and Celeste?”

I don’t trust my voice, so I give him the truth with my eyes. Inside, everything comes loose without making a sound. Discipline, control, the mask I’ve worn since I was old enough to understand what we are. All of it sifts down like ash.

My fist goes through the plaster once, then twice. A lamp explodes. Shards bite my palm. It takes a second for the sting to catch up.

“I can’t look at him and not hate him,” I say.

“Andrei. Enough.”

“He knew about the pull.” My voice breaks. “He knew how I felt, what ties me to her. And he still—“

The words choke off. I stand there breathing hard, blood sliding hot across my palm, fighting the stupid burn in my eyes.

“This isn’t about the ritual,” Villin says, settling into that particular calm that makes me want to break more things. He rises. “It’s about you. What you won’t say out loud.”

“What?”

“That you’re not made of stone. Not anymore. She reached what you keep buried, and you’re terrified she won’t choose you.”

I meet his gaze, and it hurts for more reasons than Elias. The worst is admitting I can’t seem to exist in a world where she isn’t mine in some way, and knowing I have no claim at all. I pulled back because getting closer felt like handing her the exact knife that might send her running. She’s a flight risk. I told myself that. I told myself I was doing the right thing.

“Do something,” he says, voice turning into an impatient growl. “Fight for her. Or walk away. Stop standing in the doorway of your own story.”

“I won’t leave her,” I say.

“And you think useless sacrifice buys her heart?”

The shard in my hand isn’t as sharp as that line. I set my jaw.

“Do you think he’s her Echo?” I ask, barely above a whisper.

“Maybe. Or maybe he was simply brave enough to see her. You were there, Andrei. Maybe you stayed on the edge.”

The couch takes my weight and gives nothing back. My hands shake. If I had fed earlier, the cuts would already be closing. I didn’t. I couldn’t make myself cross the dining hall with Celeste in it; the pull toward her was too close to losing control. Now the blood sticks to my skin and starts to sting like a lesson I should have learned years ago.

“What are you going to do?” Villin asks. The question is quiet. Almost kind.

“Something I don’t do.” I flex my fingers; glass falls onto the rug. “I’m going to be honest.”

He lets out a low breath that might be a laugh. It might be relief. “About time.”

I rip a strip from my shirt and bind my palm tight. It’s sloppy, but it works. I don’t want to look weak in front of him. Or her.

Villin’s eyes are as clear as a blade. “This night isn’t over,” he says.

“No,” I answer. “Not even close.”

The cold that meets me outside is sharper, cleaner. I move through the grounds like I’m one of the shadows that live here. Axis Spire after dark is a living thing. It hums and listens.

They’re gone when I reach the terrace. Only her scent remains, faint and unmistakable. I don’t realize I’ve turned toward the South Garden until the ground softens under my boots and the air thickens in that ancient way that makes your skin remember.

The sealed portal to Elmaris waits at the garden’s end, a pale pulse under old stone. The fracture along its edge is the thinnest shadow, nothing at all until you look straight at it, and then you can’t unsee the wound. A dead heart that dreams of beating. Shades pressing against the other side, hungry with time.

Maybe if I stepped through, the ache would quiet. Maybe it would break me into a kind of silence I could stand. Maybe I would come out the other side as someone who doesn’t hurt when a girl he never claimed chooses a kiss.

I take one step toward the light.

“You’re not ready,” a voice says behind me.

Elias.

I don’t turn. Wind threads smoke and damp earth through the garden, and somewhere under it, the thin metallic bite of old magic.

“So what,” I say.

“If you want to die, find another way. Not here. Not by jarring this door and letting nightmares leak because you don’t know where to put your grief. None of us can open it. It’s sealed for a reason. You know that.”

My hands begin to shake for real. Not from cold.

“It isn’t only about me.”

“I know,” he says. “It’s about her. And you. And the hollow you’re trying to fill.”

A small, ugly laugh slips out. It sounds exactly like the thing I hate.

“I’m not being clever,” he says. “It’s simple. When two brothers want the same woman, you don’t just see her. You see the parts of yourself you were hoping not to meet.”

I look at him then. There is no anger left for me to throw. Just the bone-deep tired that comes when you stop lying to yourself.

“Do you think she knows?” I ask. “What she’s doing to us.”

He comes closer and sits on a low stone, leaving the portal’s quiet throb between us like a third witness.

“I think she knows enough to hurt,” he says. “Because she didn’t mean to open anything at all.”

“Weakness?”

“Truth,” he answers. “Vulnerability. We don’t train for those.”

I sink down opposite him, eyes on the light that should mean home and means danger instead. The portal’s beat and my pulse fall into a crooked tempo that steadies me almost against my will.

“If she chooses,” I say, “what happens to the one she doesn’t?”

“He keeps breathing. He learns. He breaks a little. But he doesn’t turn into the enemy.”

I nod, even if my throat feels tight.

“I’m not fighting you,” I say at last. “I couldn’t win anything. She isn’t a prize.”

“Never was.” He rubs a palm over his jaw, a tired sound in his throat. “That might be the worst of it.”

“That none of us can have all of her,” I say. “Because she doesn’t belong to anyone.”

He lets out a quiet, humorless chuckle. “Celeste isn’t something you win. She’s a choice that changes you.”

We sit with that until the garden gives a warning shiver. The sealed crack hums like a breath pulled through teeth. Elias stands.

“Let’s not make it easier for Shades to slip through because we can’t carry our own pain,” he says.

I get up too. I don’t know if I’m stronger, but I’m finally standing on level ground.

“Elias.”

“Yeah?”

“If one day she chooses you,” I say, and it kills me to put the words out in the world, “I won’t disappear. I won’t try to break you apart. I need you to know the feeling won’t vanish either. I’ll carry it.”

His nod is steady. “I’d do the same. So I can’t judge you.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder, the briefest weight, then tips his head up the path toward the Spire.

For the first time in a long time, we feel like equals. Not in what we get. In what we’re willing to lose without poisoning the ground she has to walk.

We turn away from the portal and start back through the trees. Tomorrow is waiting somewhere up ahead like a trial.

By morning, I’ll tell Celeste the truth I kept caged in my throat. Whatever she answers will decide the man I am from here.

Maybe that’s just a lie I tell myself. Only time will tell.

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## CELESTE

The air at Axis Spire tastes like iron and second thoughts. Elias's smile still haunts the edges of my mind. I don't know if it's guilt or something I'm not ready to name. I left before sunrise. We didn't speak much after the kiss. Maybe neither of us wanted to puncture what we'd made, or maybe we both knew it wasn't whole.

I cut down a side path, the stones damp and cold through the soles of my boots. The Southern Garden is a turn away. My body angles there on instinct.

"Thought about running a little faster?"

Villin's sharp voice cuts through the dark, startling me.

I turn but don't answer. He stands between two pools of lamplight, shadow striping the hard line of his jaw. His eyes hold more than a simple observation.

"Or maybe you liked it too much to hide," he says, closing the distance as if time belongs to him.

"It's none of your business."

“Right. It never was, was it?”

I try to pass, but his fingers touch my wrist a fraction longer than necessary. Not a grip. A question. My heart jumps anyway.

“I’ll walk you home,” he growls.

“I’m not a captive.”

“No. You’re lost. And I don’t think you know where you’re heading.”

He pulls up his hood and starts toward the house. I don’t have to follow, but before I can think it over, my feet are moving.

The front hall hits like a memory of heat. Whiskey. Something scorched. Glass. A lamp lies in bright shards, light scattering slivers across the floorboards.

He doesn’t ask. He doesn’t explain. He only looks at me, too directly.

“I’m going upstairs,” I say, and my voice comes out thinner than I want.

“Go.”

He doesn’t move. I take the stairs. Halfway up, I hear his footfall behind me. I don’t stop him. I don’t know why.

My hand finds the latch. I’m breathing too quickly. He is close enough that his warmth brushes the back of my neck. I open the door and step inside.

The room has learned my shape. It holds onto sound like it’s hoarding confessions. The aftertaste of the night is still here. The kiss. The leaving. The guilt. Also, something I can’t file under either.

His steps come in slow, even beats. He doesn’t knock. He never has.

“I said I wanted to be alone,” I whisper into the dark.

“And you still didn’t stop me,” he says, raking a hand through his black hair until it falls out of place.

“What do you want, Villin? Not just in this room. In all of it. Why act like you have the right to judge me, like you know me?”

He comes forward—not a predator, but a man who understands that space is a lie when he’s already under your skin.

“I don’t know you,” he says. “But I’ve watched you enough to read you. It isn’t about a right to judge. It’s about needing to understand. And yes, it’s about jealousy.”

I can’t place this shift in him. The man of iron and precision feels raw around the edges.

“Elias kissed you,” he says, voice pitched low.

“Yes.” It slips out fast.

“And you kissed him back.”

I arch a brow. “And if I did?”

“It bothers me that I cared.”

I look away. The honesty lands where it shouldn’t. I don’t plan to let him see that.

“Not long ago,” I say, meeting his eyes, “you told me I’d ‘done well’ these last seven years. The way you said it—like I’d sold my body to stay alive.”

“I said it.”

Rage crawls up my throat. “You said it with disgust. With that easy superiority of someone who never went to bed hungry. Do you want to know what I did, Villin? I worked at a club. I carried trays. I counted tips. I slept with a knife under my pillow and my back to the wall so I wouldn’t become what you all decided I must have been.”

Something in him stills. Regret flickers and vanishes—too quickly to track, too disciplined to set.

“If you’re waiting for an apology—”

“I’m not,” I cut in. “I want you to understand you don’t get to make me feel small. You weren’t there. You have no idea what it is to live without a name, without a title, without anyone telling you you’re meant for more than surviving.”

His answer snaps as quietly as a whip. “I do.”

The tone has changed. Lower. Unarmored.

“I didn’t bring you back to humiliate you,” he says. “There was an alert on you. Every team knew your face. You hid well for seven years, and that impressed me more than I said out loud. After I met you, all I have done is try to understand why you didn’t break. Why didn’t you fold? That scares me.”

“Because I’m not what you expected.”

“Because if Elias is your Echo, it will ruin me.”

I let out a shaky breath. I don’t know which feeling to hold. Anger. Understanding. Confusion. I settle on the truth.

“I don’t know if I’ll do the Resonance Ritual,” I tell him.

“What?”

“I’m afraid of what it will say about me. That I belong to no one. Or to everyone. Or worse, that no one who matters is mine.”

He lifts a hand and stops before he touches me, as if contact would count for more than either of us will admit. “You don’t owe anyone a decision. But you should ask why you’re here. Why does the feeling itself scare you?”

His eyes flash. Tension coils there, but beneath it is something fragile I never expected to find.

“Maybe it’s Stockholm,” I whisper. “Maybe I’m trained to gravitate toward the men who took me, lied to me, pressed me against walls.”

“Is that who I am to you?” His voice barely lifts. As if a louder word would break whatever this is.

“That’s what the rational part says. If it were anyone else, not you, I would have burned everything down by now. I wouldn’t be standing in a room that smells like whiskey and fury, lying in a bed that isn’t mine.”

He steps in and lowers just enough that we breathe the same air. “And what does the other voice say? The inconvenient one. The wild one.”

It costs me to say it, but I do. “That if you touched me right now, I wouldn’t move.”

His lashes fall closed for a heartbeat. His hand rises and finds my cheek, cool and careful. He gives me time to refuse. I don’t. I lean into that single point like it could quiet the world.

Then he’s gone. He steps back as if his own body is a risk.

“Not now,” he says, his voice strained with control. “Not like this.”

“Why?”

“Because if I touch you before your heart is whole, I’ll start believing it belongs to me. And if I’m not the one you choose, I will become someone I don’t want to be.”

We stand there with everything half-finished. The restraint hurts worse than any kiss would have.

He turns on his heel and leaves. The soft click of the door feels louder than thunder.

Silence drapes the room. Not the kind that soothes. The kind that burrows. I lie back on the bed and stare at the dark ceiling until it seems to tilt closer.

Three men. Three versions of gravity.

Andrei comes first. Ice and heat twisted together, his control wound so tight I worry it will snap. The way he watches when he thinks I won't notice, that slit of vulnerability before he locks it down and hides the shake of his hand in a pocket. With him, quiet gathers like storm pressure. I've felt it every time our skin found a reason. The night he almost said something and bit it back. The morning he pressed a cup of coffee into my hand, his fingers trembled.

He keeps choosing silence. Or he uses anger as a shield. His words cut deeper than blades.

Elias is different. Light and ease, and something ancient under both. He makes a room feel warmer. His sadness lives in his eyes, old and patient. Our kiss was sweet, but not innocent. It came too easily. Too soft. I fell into it like a step in a familiar dance, and that scared me. Not because of him. Because of me. Because I answered without thinking and didn't know if I was answering him or if it was just a reflex.

And Villin. He shouldn't be in the equation. He hunted me. Bound me. Dragged me back to a place I swore I hated. He also gave me a bed and four walls that, for the first time in years, felt like I could breathe inside them. He isn't kind, and he isn't cruel. He is a controlled disaster I am learning how to read. He touched me tonight like I might burn him, and did it anyway. I should hate him. I don't. Worse, I want to reach back.

Maybe it is Stockholm. Maybe I lived as prey for so long that my body stops shaking only when the predator is near. Maybe I've been confusing adrenaline with affection. Or maybe I'm different now. I used to be a princess with a crown of ice. Now I look in the mirror and don't trust the face looking back.

My heart knocks against my ribs. In the middle of that noise, something else brushes my mind.

It isn't a sound. It's a pressure on my temple. A thought that doesn't start with me.

*Will you run, or will you stay and burn?*

I sit up. The window is a slab of silver. The room is empty. The question remains.

Maybe I won't do the ritual. Maybe I don't want an answer written in a magic I can't control.

But tonight, in a house that smells like vanilla and leather and the men who don't belong to me and somehow still shape me, I understand this much. I'm not afraid of love.

I'm afraid it will look nothing like the story I was taught to want.

And maybe this is the truest thing of all. *You can hold your heart in pieces and still love every shard.*

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## CELESTE

Villin’s house isn’t built for peace. It wears gothic luxury like armor. High ceilings. Black-paneled walls. Stained glass that bends daylight into colors that shouldn’t exist. Morning filters through a blood-red window and washes half the main hall in a bruise of light. When I take the stairs, the boards mutter under my heels, and the glow makes it feel as if I’m walking inside a slow, steady heart.

The kitchen is at odds with the rest of the house. Warmer. Modern, almost. The table’s wood is too dark. Coffee fights with the smell of tea and toast. Candles burn, though the sun is already climbing. Weekends are never normal here.

Andrei sits at the table before anyone speaks. Black shirt open at the throat. Hair pushed back with his fingers and left it that way. A thin wrap of gauze covers his palm. He rolls the handle of his cup between his fingers and says nothing. He never has to. The room adjusts to him the way a room adjusts to a piano with one taut, unsounded string.

Elias moves like he owns gravity, not the room. He checks on the kettle, on the bread, on me. The sweater he threw on is a bruised wine color that makes the heat in his skin look deliberate. He is easy and watchful at the same time, the way he was on the terrace when the night made all our choices feel closer.

Villin comes in last and does not bother with hello. He pours coffee, black and too hot, and drinks it like habit. In the slanted red light, he looks made for edges and verdicts, but there is a slow pull at his shoulders I do not miss. Restraint has weight. He wears it like armor.

“Did you sleep?” he asks, eyes on the mug.

“A little.”

On the table, toast waits beside butter and honey, soft-boiled eggs in a bowl that doesn’t match the rest, bacon cooling on paper. Three glass jars sit near the centerpiece. One holds blue leaves veined with silver. One glows pearly, as if a moon is trapped inside. The last gives a faint tremor when Andrei’s hand passes by.

“What is that one?” I ask.

“Cordia,” Elias says. “Good for holding a dream. Too much and you end up lost in the wrong one. It should be locked up.”

He looks at Villin; Villin doesn’t return it.

“And how would you know?” Andrei asks, voice smooth and sharp at once.

“I read,” Elias says. “And I pay attention. To plants and people.”

Andrei’s mouth tightens. “Leave it.”

Elias’s smile sharpens. “Should I leave what you did last night, too? You were in the South Garden till almost dawn. If you could have climbed through that fissure with your bare hands, you would have tried.”

Andrei folds his arms. No denial. No apology. He is made of stone with a fault line no one is supposed to see.

“Elias,” I scold, because someone has to. “Enough.”

The light creeps across the table. Villin’s finger keeps an unhurried tap on the edge, each beat threading the silence tighter.

“At least Andrei moved,” he says after a beat. “You stayed still, then decided a kiss would solve what silence could not. Impressive. Mature.”

“It was a choice,” Elias says. “I don’t regret it. And I’m not going to fight you over it.”

He runs a hand through his hair as if patience might be hiding there. I wonder how the news got here so fast. Then I remember where I live. Nothing in this house travels slowly, not when it has a pulse.

I am not a prize. I haven’t promised anyone anything. Still, the room tastes like old jealousy and new hurt, and I did not invite either.

Villin sets his cup down with care that reads as suppressed anger. “Do you know what it is to live in the same house as someone who undoes you and not touch her?” he snaps. “To watch and offer coffee because that is all you are allowed.”

The chair legs scrape as Andrei stands. The cup tips, spilling coffee on the wood. He walks out without looking at any of us.

The ache behind my eyes threatens to become a headache. Too many sharp edges for this early in the morning. Too much truth dressed as accusation. Villin turns to the sink and rinses his mug, sleeves pushed up, forearms tight. He hides unrest in precision. I recognize the tactic because I’ve used it too many times to count.

Elias follows Andrei into the hall. “Wait,” he pleads, already softer. “Not like this. Talk to me.”

The back door opens for a second. Cold light fills the gap. I move until I can see them without joining them. They stand in the courtyard where the stones remember winter even in late fall.

Andrei rakes a hand through his hair. Elias reaches for his arm and lets his fingers rest there. They share quietly until it settles.

“It isn’t only about her,” Andrei says. “It’s what she starts in me. I can’t wrap my head around it.”

“You think I can?” Elias murmurs. “You think it doesn’t wreck me to watch you come apart. Or him. I’m here for her. Not to win.”

“She doesn’t deserve wars.”

“No. She deserves honesty. Even when it hurts.”

Something shifts between them. Not a truce, not yet, but the ground evens out. Two men who were handed the same fire decided to carry it differently. It should make me feel like a prize again. It doesn’t. It makes me tired and grateful in the same breath.

I turn back and find Amias in the kitchen doorway as if he had been cut from the paneling and stepped forward. His face is neutral. His eyes, though, are clear water over deep stone, and jealousy lives there like a shadow no light can erase.

He is not on the edge today. He is in the room with the rest of us. I feel the change in the way my pulse answers to him.

When Andrei and Elias disappear into the garden’s shadows, Amias crosses to me. He keeps his voice barely above a whisper.

“It is difficult not to hate you for being this alive,” he breathes.

I face him. There is no softness here, no cruelty. Only truth, bare and unsheathed.

“No one is forcing you to stay,” I say, the calm in my tone less bravado than decision, heavy with the weight of choice.

“That’s the trouble,” he admits. “I stay, even without the right to want anything, and yet I want here, not in the visions.”

His hand brushes my elbow—light, not possessive, not comforting. A mark he leaves for himself, one that lingers even when I tell myself I imagined it.

“You think this is Stockholm?” I ask because that’s easier than asking if he feels what I feel.

“No,” he says after the kind of pause that means he could give me three different versions of the truth and chooses one. “Stockholm means you love the person who holds your chains. No one here holds yours. You have men who are drowning and have forgotten how to swim.”

My breath catches. “And you. Where do you fit?”

“I go under with my eyes open,” he mutters. “I wait to see if you will let me breathe in this world and whatever comes next.”

He leaves as quietly as he arrived. No door slam, no theatrics—just an absence that changes the shape of the room. The red light from the stained glass shifts, richer now, as if the house learned a new rhythm with him in it and is deciding whether to keep it.

I can’t let myself get lost in my thoughts, so I step into the kitchen and pour a cup of coffee. The warmth seeps into my fingers. For a moment, the kitchen feels settled. I know it won’t last. Nothing does here—not the quiet, not the heat, not the notion that any of us can want something without paying for it.

Through the open door, Elias says something I cannot hear. Andrei answers with his head bent, then looks up. For a second, he forgets to hide.

The rawness in his face is not anger. It’s fear with nowhere to go.

Villin returns and stops opposite me at the table. He doesn’t crowd my space. He never does. He stands in it anyway, which is a different kind of pressure.

“You don’t have to manage us,” he says.

“I’m not trying to,” I answer. “I’m trying to breathe.”

His mouth lifts, the smallest movement, barely perceptible. “That I can help with.”

He refills his cup and drinks without a flinch. The bitter scent pulls me back to last night, to the terrace, to the way Elias’s warmth steadied me. Guilt presses, thin and familiar, but I suppress it. I refuse to pretend that wanting is a sin.

“About the Cordia,” I say, looking at the trembling jar. “Put it away. Please.”

He studies me, then the plant, then me again. “Done,” he smirks, and carries it to a cabinet I haven’t opened yet.

Thank the Goddess for small mercies. For now, it’s enough.

When Elias and Andrei step back inside, the cold rides with them. Andrei’s gaze skims mine and lands away. Elias gives me a look that promises a conversation we are not ready to have in a room with witnesses.

“Breakfast is over,” Villin’s voice cuts through the awkwardness. He is not ordering. He is closing a scene. “Eat later if you want it warm.”

He leaves his empty cup in the sink and disappears down the hall. Andrei follows a moment later, hand in his hair again, the bandage gone from his palm. He must have healed it somehow in the yard. I do not know whether to be relieved or disappointed that I did not.

Elias waits. I expect a quip and get none. “You good?” he asks.

“I will be.”

He nods and touches two fingers to the table, a small tap like he is leaving a marker. Then he heads after his brother.

For a long beat, I stand with the candles and the cooling toast and the red light pooling against the dark wood. I should go upstairs. I should find rest, or training, or anything that looks like control. Instead, I stay where I am and listen to the house breathe.

It’s not a place built for peace. It’s a place built to test whether we can live without it. And somehow, that makes me want to try.

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## VILLIN

The quiet in my home office isn’t natural. I built it. I hold it in place the way you hold a dangerous thing by a thin, merciless leash. Green light falls through the stained glass and breaks over the books in uneven shapes. The whiskey sits at half, untouched. Wax and old wood and a trace of vanilla hang in the room as if the walls refuse to forget what they have seen.

This is a command room and an altar. Treaties were signed here. Curses were spoken. I have fought my worst demons in this chair more times than I will admit.

I feel Amias before he knocks. His steps are quiet; his rhythm never is. He is the most controlled among us, which is a polite way to say he can drive me mad. He has also been my closest friend for nearly twenty years, since the day the Academy took us in.

“Villin,” he says, walking in without waiting.

“Is that how you enter other people’s houses?” I ask flatly, though there’s no heat in my voice.

His eyes catch the light, a quick flash of green, and he smiles, sharp as a blade. “Only when the owner is busy licking his wounds and might miss a gentle knock.”

He knows how to push my buttons. I let my mouth curve in a smirk. “You grew comfortable fast.”

“Not with the house. With her in it.”

That lands harder than a fist. I keep my face empty, take my jacket from the chair back, and meet his eyes across the desk.

“What do you want, Amias?”

“I want to know how long you plan to play the generous host before you turn back into the man who captured her.”

I move closer until only two steps of air live between us, not enough space for diplomacy.

“You think I do not know what I look like to you?” he asks. “You think I do not see the way you watch me. The fourth at a table set before I arrived.”

“No,” I keep my voice steady. “I see the only one of us who refuses to get his hands dirty. You show up when the game is already unfolding. The rest of us have ash on our fingers.”

“She looked at me today like she knew me,” he says, and there is nothing calm in him.

His words carry a gloating I refuse to analyze, and I let silence tighten around us. I pour whiskey and hold the glass toward him. He refuses, of course.

“You think you can win her with silence and a stare,” I say. “She will explode in your hands. You can't want closeness and keep her at a distance.”

“You can't ask for absolution without saying what you did,” he retorts.

He is not guessing. He is seeing. It stings.

“I did what had to be done,” I say. “You have not even decided whether you are in this.”

“I have now.”

He doesn’t leave. He sits back in the chair opposite mine, and the room settles around the choice he has just made.

“Did you read the report?” he asks after a beat, and the air seems to cool a few degrees, sobering me.

“Yes. Three Shades out. Two stopped in the north woods. One missing.”

“If they move deeper into Axis Spire, the balance slips. The fissure in Elmaris grows. The wards will not hold.” His voice dips. “I dreamed a shadow touched the heart.”

“Celeste?” I blurt before I can choose better.

“The world,” he says, his hands tightening into quiet fists.

Amias dreams. Sometimes the visions lie. Sometimes they are more solid than the wood underfoot.

“The Council meets in a few weeks,” I say. “Not enough time to fix anything. They will want a scapegoat. I make an easy one.”

“Or she does,” he murmurs.

My head lifts.

“Her father is coming,” he adds. “Not as a father.”

I let out a long breath. “Councilman Nightmoor will not tolerate a daughter who feels too much. He will not tolerate the sight of four men around her and no declared loyalty.”

“He will try to pull her out of Axis Spire,” Amias says. “Or pin her in place with the Resonance Ritual. And if the Echoes the Goddess names do not suit him, they will vanish the way Evanthe’s Echoes vanished. There has never been a queen with only one Echo, at least that is the story they

like to tell. After Evanthe’s ritual, her immortal Echoes dropped into the ground faster than anyone could count.”

“Or he just removes her from the board entirely,” I muse.

The pause that follows carries a weight deep enough to settle in my bones. I adjust my collar, not from cold, but from the ache that comes with old rage.

“And the ball,” I add. “That performance they stage after every session. Robes, vows, and gods for an evening. She will be the showpiece. A pawn to move in front of a crowded room.”

Amias closes his eyes for a moment, and I know he can already see her in that light with their eyes on her.

“I have never stood in Elmaris,” he says. “Neither have you. The portal closed one hundred and seventy-five years ago. All I know is what I have seen in visions. If we let them break her, none of us will know her afterward.”

“That is why she is here,” I say. “Under my roof. Not because I have the right. Because I do not trust anyone else to keep her breathing. I do not trust Nightmoor at all. He looks at her and sees leverage. He doesn’t see a daughter. Elmaris does not belong to him. It never did.”

Jealousy flashes in his eyes, dark, old, and ugly. Not only for her. For standing on the outside while the rest of us have lines to stand in.

“That is how it has always been,” he whispers. “I am the last one. I am the witness. I am the one not chosen. I will not let her be a victim of that pattern. Not her.”

He moves to the door and stops with his hand on the frame. “You are not afraid of Councilman Nightmoor,” he says without turning. “You are afraid she will listen to him.”

I close my eyes. I do not argue. He is right.

There is nothing to do now but ready the house for war and hope the woman I dragged back is strong enough to save us anyway. If she lets him shape the story, not even the Goddess will save us.

When he is gone, the office returns to the habit of a man who cannot let go. I pull the oak drawer and take out the file I have built for months. Her years off the grid. The night she disappeared. She ran on her eighteenth birthday, the exact night the wards at Nightmoor House failed all at once. No residual magic. No witness. Council records are blank where the truth should live.

*Why did you leave, Celeste? Why then?*

The sealed stacks in the archives are open for senior signatures. I used mine. No one asked why. They expect the session. They think I am building my defense. I would laugh if it did not taste like ash.

What I found is not what I thought I wanted. It’s worse.

Her mother’s name is there, and the room chills when I read it aloud. Evanthe. Not a rumor, not a secret. A queen. Born to Elmaris before the Veil fell and the Great Seal. The last of a direct line. She was meant to hold the balance between worlds. They called her soft. They called her a lover of humans. They called her weak because it was easier than admitting they were afraid of what mercy could do.

Then she vanished. They wrote it as death. No grave. No marker. Only gossip. A mission gone wrong. A choice arranged behind closed doors.

Her father, Councilman Nightmoor, is a strategist and a necromancer. When Evanthe chose her Axis and he was named among her Echoes, the bond carried longevity and immortality to the ones inside her circle. Power breeds hunger. He was never the heir to Elmaris. He could not accept living

as consort when she was crowned. Jealousy bends into strategy if you let it sit too long.

He fed the fear. He pointed to the Shades crawling through weakened seams and said the world needed walls. Alaska holds more than ice. At the crosshairs of the ley lines, the veil always ran thin, so the Spire rose there to watch and to guard. He forced her to seal the portal, locked Evanthe away from the pull that made her, and called it victory. Elmaris bled and went quiet. Survivors fell through to this side, or did not. Those already here mourned the rest and learned to make a life without looking back.

He built an empire on that grief.

Celeste grew up inside the picture he painted. On the night she came of age, the truth in her blood must have woken. Not just maturity. An old summons that does not care for politics. The wards failed. She walked out. They call it running. I would not.

She did not flee. She rescued herself.

And I found her and brought her back. I put her in a house with two doors and a thousand eyes. Her mother’s name was erased in these halls while her father’s face is set in glass.

We will all pay for the old choices. Not only Celeste. Not only me. The whole Spire.

The portal shakes on its hinges. Shades are coming sharper. Nightmoor is on his way with the Council behind him. The ball will be a theater of power, elegance wrapped in danger. They will watch her the way hunters watch a white stag. Not as a wonder. *As a target.*

I have to choose now. Hide her so well even the Goddess must look twice, or light a match and set the world alight to keep her free.

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**20**

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## CELESTE

I am late. Again.

Cold rides the stone corridors and bites the backs of my hands, yet I do not slow. The history of Elmaris is tucked at the far end of the east wing. My pulse is loud in my throat by the time the door protests as it opens, and every head tilts toward me.

Cassandra sits in the front row with one leg crossed over the other, uniform immaculate, ponytail high. She does not speak, only lets the corner of her mouth lift—just enough to invite an audience. Rhea leans in beside her, voice sugared and poisonous.

“Look. The princess of the dead wandered out of the dark. Guess tragedy’s good for punctuality.”

“Enough,” Amias says. He does not raise his voice. He never needs to.

He stands at the lectern today with a weathered folio open, brass clasps catching the light. His eyes find me: the calm green of deep water. Not kind, not angry, simply professional—and somehow that hurts more than a scolding.

“Please, take any open seat,” he says, gesturing toward the rows. “Our history is too often misread to be left unfinished.”

I keep my chin up and slide into the second row. I can feel Elias behind me without turning. His posture is ramrod straight, hands laced, and the weight of his attention settles like an ache between my shoulder blades.

He does not try to smile; not after the strained silence that has lived between him and his twin since last night.

Andrei angles toward the window, as if the class were a dream he refuses to enter. Rhea shifts to catch his eye, but he doesn’t turn.

Amias clears his throat, and the room settles around his voice.

“Today, we look at Elmaris before the Seal.”

He passes his palm over the vellum. Light rises from the page and blooms into the air, a map suspended in gold. Six territories emerge, sigils brightening at their centers like tiny stars. Lines stretch between them in a glowing lattice.

“Elmaris was never only a place,” he says. “It was a bridge, a weave between dimensions braided along Ley Lines. The choice to build Axis Spire here was not sentimental. The northern threads converge under our feet.”

The projection hums. I feel the vibration more than I hear it—the same low current that lives beneath these floors and, lately, under my skin.

“Queens were not mere figureheads,” he continues. “Their authority was no ceremonial gesture. Those who could maintain balance were conduits, not just rulers.”

The map shifts. Light traces a woman’s face with quiet precision: silver hair, green eyes, a composed mouth that whispers kindness until the steel beneath it appears. I look nothing like her.

Evanthe.

Everything inside me tightens. I have not seen my mother since I was five, yet recognition stirs like muscle memory—the set of her eyes, the grief tucked into the calm.

A whisper slips from Rhea to Cassandra. The small laugh that follows dies when the air thickens around the next words.

“Then came war. Shades pressed through places where the weave thinned. No origin anyone trusts. Corruption that can ruin even a vampire. Axis Spire was raised on the Lines to anchor the breach. Alaska was chosen because the earth is thinner here. Our foundation is a nexus.”

The royal Axis sealed the portal one hundred seventy-five years ago. Publicly, it was for protection. Privately, the reasons read differently: control, possession, fear of an inheritance that would not obey.

“After the birth of her daughter, one hundred fifty years after the sealing,” he says, and it feels like a hand closing around my heart, “everything changed.”

A soft ripple runs through the room.

“Official histories say Evanthe died. Unofficially, there is no grave.”

Silence holds, full of the things no one wants to say: entire families stranded on this side, children split from parents, circles broken and renamed sacrifice.

Amias rests his fingertips on the folio and softens his tone, guiding us through the memory rather than lecturing.

“Axis,” he says. “A central soul, and the harmonics that resonate to meet it. We call them Echoes. Old tales call them fated mates and make it sound simple. Sometimes it is. The Resonance Ritual does not create a bond; it names what already hums. Only the central steps into the Seer’s circle. By

Saeris’s pull, every Echo bound to that center is drawn from wherever they are. They do not need to be in this room, or even within a day’s travel. They appear because the pull finds them.”

He lifts his hand. The map folds into a constellation that circles his wrist, then fades.

“Those sealed behind Elmaris appear as shadow,” he says, voice low. “Presence without a face.” His gaze sweeps the room, and for a moment, it feels like the shadows themselves draw closer. “An incomplete circle can hold, though it runs hot. The stronger the center, the more strain an absence forces through the bond. Some circles manage it, riding the edge without breaking—but they are rare.”

He pauses, fingertips brushing the folio as if to steady the memory. “Longevity matters as well. If a circle includes a vampire—like Evanthe, the others share that span. They do not turn; the duration stretches. *Killable* becomes very specific: an onyx blade, decapitation, certain poisons taught under lock and oath. Timing matters too. Vampires awaken fully at twenty-five and may enter the circle then. Hybrids mature faster and can step in at eighteen.”

The room feels smaller after he speaks, each word a pulse that threads through the air, tracing the outlines of power and danger.

From the back, Elias speaks so quietly that the room leans in. “She looks like you.”

Heat flares across my cheeks. I do not turn. Amias hears. The folio snaps shut, a sharp, final click that cuts through the quiet.

“That is all for today,” he says. “Celeste, remain. The rest of you are dismissed.”

Chairs scrape across the floor. Cassandra drifts past, her smirk carrying a quiet menace.

“Need extra credit the creative way?” she murmurs.

I ignore her.

Elias hesitates in the doorway, then stops beside his twin. “Did you notice?” he asks quietly.

“What,” Andrei says without turning.

“She never looks back.”

Andrei’s jaw tightens. He says nothing. Rhea sidles closer, voice syrup-slick.

“Dining hall, Andrei. Or did someone else claim your morning?”

“No one claimed anything, and you aren’t involved,” he answers, quick and flat, his eyes still on the window. The words land harder than they should.

When the room empties, Amias tips his head toward a narrow door behind the lectern.

“Come.”

His office lies behind the mezzanine, a vaulted space where light falls in long panels and the air smells of candle smoke and strong tea. Charts and old maps cover the table. He doesn’t offer a chair, and I don't reach for one.

“Why did you keep me?” My voice lands cooler than I mean—brittle against the tension in the room. I try to mask the tremor in it, but it’s there, a faint quiver I cannot hide.

He closes the door with careful hands, and the sound seems too loud in the quiet. Palms braced on the desk, he steadies the room, or maybe himself. I watch the muscles in his forearms tighten, the deliberate weight of him filling the space between us.

“Because I'm done pretending I don't feel it,” he whispers.

I swallow, and the words come out softer than I intend. “You can. You should.” My own honesty surprises me.

He steps closer. Then closer again. Not a prowl, not aggression. Just certainty—shortening the space until I can feel the heat radiating off him, until I am aware of every shift of his weight. My chest tightens, not from fear, but from the inevitability of it, the pull that refuses negotiation.

“Watching you with Elias,” he says, voice low, deliberate, “and seeing Andrei stare through the window while a girl tried to step into his line of sight, something cracked. I am not here to speak for them. I am speaking for myself.”

I can feel the words settle in my chest. “What am I meant to do with that?”

“Know it.” His voice roughens, edges raw. “Know that you are not a lesson I deliver and forget. You are why I show up in the morning. You are why I do not sleep.” His gaze pins me. My stomach twists, tension, and something sharper I do not name.

“I knew you before I met you—not as fantasy, as warnings. Futures that told me to keep my distance. You are real now. You can see me.”

I do see him. Every line of him, the careful hardness, the sudden vulnerability, the truth he can no longer hide. My pulse hammers, and I realize I’ve been holding my breath. I trace the line of his jaw, the set of his shoulders.

The composure he wears like armor trembles at the edges, tiny fractures I never noticed before. Beneath it, a man waits. Not a title. Not a role. Just him. That thought settles uneasily in my chest, heavier than I expect.

“You’ve always been the steady one,” I murmur, voice barely above the space between us. “The Seer who keeps the line. The balance.”

“My balance is not holding,” he says simply. The words fall plain, heavy. “I think you already know why.”

I do not answer. My heart skips, stutters, and my body betrays me, inching forward even though every lesson I’ve drilled into muscle memory screams to pull away. Control is a mantra I’ve clung to, but it feels fragile here, in this small room, with him.

“Are you angry about Elias?”

“I am angry that people treat you like a stage,” he says, each word deliberate, simmering just under the surface. “They enjoy your strength and ignore the cost. They step in and out as if the door does not strike you. I cannot do that. I will not.”

I shift back a fraction. My spine aches from the tension—from wanting to run and wanting to stay at the same time. He lifts a hand and pauses, patient. His palm hovers before settling on my cheek, warm, grounding, questioning. Not a claim. Not a demand. A bridge; a question pressed against my skin, waiting for an answer I cannot articulate.

“I do not want to own you.” Every syllable is measured, tight with restraint. “Let me matter.”

The air between us thickens, pulsing. Heat coils and presses, dense as the wards we draw in training, the way a circle hums with potential energy just before it snaps into being. Every breath, every heartbeat, feels amplified.

He steps closer. There is no distance left to measure, no space to hide behind. His breath brushes my lips, tentative, teasing, and my heart skips a beat. My chest feels like it could fracture under the weight of him.

I taste the tension first, then the warmth, and finally, him. The world contracts until nothing exists outside this small, suspended moment. The ache, the heat, the want, all sharpened and unbearable.

And he kisses me.

It’s not slow, not gentle, not anything I expected. It’s precise, urgent, and full of words neither of us can speak aloud. My hands find him without thinking, fingers threading into the warmth at the back of his neck. The kiss presses and pulls, a question and an answer in one, and the room melts around us.

Even as I give in—desire coiling tight in my chest—a part of me watches: the part trained to see danger, betrayal, control. In this world, letting someone matter is always a risk. Right now, I don’t care.

All that exists is him.

He makes a small, startled sound, and something opens in me that I do not have language for. It’s not tidy; it’s hunger braided with relief. His hand slips lower, and the spell snaps. I pull back, breath shaking.

“Not now,” I say, my voice trembling. “Not like this.”

He stills. Then he nods once. Resignation and respect move together in the gesture.

“You are right.”

He steps back, though his eyes hold a promise he does not voice. The room seems louder without his nearness.

Guilt sets its hook, not the kind that punishes desire, but the kind that knows truth can point in more than one direction, and every path charges a price. I see Cassandra’s smile flicker like a blade, Rhea tilting her chin with quiet insistence, Elias in the doorway choosing silence over charm. Andrei

refusing to turn his head, his hands trembling as he passes me a cup without looking.

I think of my mother on the map. No grave. A story cut short, rewritten by the survivors. The thought tastes bitter, like ash in my mouth.

“Amias,” I say, needing air that isn’t all heat, “the Axis lecture. There was more you did not say.”

He stops, and the room feels heavier. His eyes catch mine, and in that brief meeting I see the teacher’s caution and the man’s raw honesty laid bare. He steps forward—not to hide the man, but to stand beside him—letting the authority of the lesson exist without burying the truth beneath it. Lamplight flickers across his features, highlighting the faint lines of worry at his temples, the tension in his shoulders, the way he measures every word before it leaves his lips.

I can feel the air shift. It thickens, charged, almost electric, like the moment before a resonance takes hold. Every heartbeat feels magnified, every breath shared in the small space between us. My pulse hammers. I’m aware of the faint scrape of my boots against the stone floor, of the scent of parchment and old wood and something uniquely him.

“I need to understand,” I whisper, more to myself than him, though the sound carries, threading through the quiet.

He tilts his head slightly, and in that motion, it’s like a dam breaks. The teacher’s measured composure bends just enough to let the truth spill. “Not all lessons are for instruction alone,” he says. “Some are warnings. Some are preparation. Some… are for you to witness, to carry, to survive.”

I nod, though the knot in my chest tightens. This is what it means to stand at the edge of understanding, to know just enough to see the stakes and to feel them tugging at every instinct I have.

“Only the central must step into the circle,” he says. “The Seer calls, Saeris answers, and the Echoes arrive. Some appear out of thin air. Some are pulled through doors they were about to open. Some arrive as shadows because the Seal still holds them. Incomplete circles can function in the field, but they drain the center more quickly. The stronger the center, the more forgiving the arithmetic—and even then, there are limits. Vampires change the math entirely. Their circles inherit time. It’s sanctified for good reasons and terrible ones.”

“And if the center refuses the ritual,” I ask, “or delays it?”

“Then the song keeps trying to finish itself,” he says. “It fills the hallways with coincidence. It puts people in the same room who should not be, at hours that make no sense. It presses on dreams. It is patient until it is not.”

I exhale. My hands have curled into fists without me noticing. I force them open.

“I will not be fate’s pawn,” I say. “Not the Council’s, not my father’s, not anyone’s.”

“Then choose what you are,” he says quietly, “before someone else names it for you.”

The words settle over me like weight and armor at once. Outside, a bell marks the hour. Far down the hall, I hear footsteps and the bright chatter of students who think history belongs to the past.

Amias steps aside, and the narrow door clicks open. Light from the mezzanine spills across the threshold. He does not reach for me again. He does not demand a decision I cannot give.

“Thank you for the lesson,” I say. It feels too simple for everything that passed between us, yet it is true.

“You are not the only one learning,” he answers.

I step into the corridor. The air is colder than when I entered. I pause, letting it brush my face. Somewhere below, Cassandra rehearses a new line, and Rhea hunts for a mirror. Elias will choose caution. Andrei will choose silence and call it duty. Villin will set the table like a battlefield and pretend that a meal can hold the peace.

I start down the stairs without looking back. The goddess holds a circle straining to complete itself. The portal hums beneath the foundations. My mother's map has no grave.

I alone decide which song to answer and when. I am done running. I am done surviving and being just… Celeste. I am Celeste Nightmoor, and I will not let my life be built on survival. I will learn to reclaim my power.

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# 21

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## ELIAS

I brace my hands on the cold railing of the bridge that hangs between the Academy's two wings and try to breathe. Wind slips through my clothes and keeps me awake, sharper than the ache running under my ribs. From here, I can see the low light in Amias's office. He is there. She is there with him.

My thoughts twist into something I don't like; my stomach pulls tight at the idea that Celeste—who kissed me two nights ago—might be losing her breath for someone else. I have no claim. I had a chance, then let it go quiet. We shared a moment that stole the air from my lungs, a look that burned hotter than any incantation, and then I let the silence fester.

Footsteps reach me before the man does. I know Andrei's gait the way I know my own. We are twins in body, rarely in approach. He carries the shadow; I carry the voice.

"Is she still there?" he growls.

I nod without looking at him. "Yes."

He leans on the rail beside me. His presence lands heavy, coiled. The same woman links us, which means the same want divides us even as it keeps us standing in the same strip of air.

“You think something is happening between them?” he asks, so low it barely counts as speech.

“I don’t know. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“He doesn't seem like the man who resists once he decides.”

“She's not the kind of woman who fits anyone’s game.”

I turn. For a heartbeat, I see my own face reflected back, then the differences settle into place. In his eyes, I find what lives in mine—a banked fury—and beneath it, something he guards even from me.

“What do you see when you look at her?” I murmur.

“A wound that refuses to close,” he says, and the honesty lands harder than any taunt. “A promise I never had the courage to name.”

“I see a choice I didn't make when it mattered.”

The light in Amias’s office flickers. Time moves on. We don’t. Two shadows against a sky that keeps writing without us.

“We can’t split her.” His eyes remain fixed on the horizon.

“No.” I keep my eyes on the glass. “She’ll choose all of us, or none.”

Silence falls like ice around us, sharp and unyielding. It offers no comfort, only the brittle truce that holds us together.

“And if Amias was the first to touch her?” His voice is barely a whisper.

My hands grip the rail without permission, heat crawling up my throat, every nerve screaming to cross the bridge, push through his door, take her hand, and claim her as mine, though I have no right, no vow, only the memory of a kiss and the long night that followed, lingering like fire beneath my ribs.

“Then the rest of us waited for the perfect moment,” I breathe, letting the words hang, “and we let the one we had slip through our fingers.”

The office light goes dark. The small click of it carries further than it should. The air is colder now; it tastes like jealousy, and like the distance opening between me and the woman I can't stop thinking about.

I push away from the rail and go, Andrei letting me pass without a word. I don't look back; I don't need to. We are bleeding in the same place, and that is enough.

My steps ring on stone as I cut through the hall toward the dormitory. Students part around me, quick to read a mood they want no part of. I shoulder my door open. It hits the wall and rebounds.

The desk is a mess of open books and curling maps, notes layered on notes about Elmaris, Echoes, and the futures others would force into prophecy. I stare at them long enough to see only patterns of ink, no truth. Belief feels like a luxury today. What I cannot shake is this: every page, every theory, every line of fate knots back to her. Celeste is the thread that holds it all taut. Without her, it unravels. I cross to the minibar, crack open a bottle of blood, and drink until the shake in my hands dulls. I have no appetite for the dining hall. Solitude and a bitter swallow will have to suffice.

For the first time, I reject the rules that keep their world intact while shattering mine. I want to fight. Not for power, not for a claim. I want to live in the truth between us and let it shape me.

Whatever choice she makes, I refuse to be a shadow in someone else’s story. I will be present. I will be seen. If the cost is my brother—or the version of myself that has always stepped aside—then I will pay it with no illusions left.

Today, I choose to stop waiting. Tomorrow, I start acting like the man she actually kissed.

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**22**

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## ELIAS

Morning comes in with wind and a sky the color of metal. Andrei is already up when I open my eyes, hair tamed with those precise, economical movements that mean he has caged whatever he doesn’t want to feel. He says nothing. I say nothing. It’s a new kind of quiet between us, not cold, just heavy. We both know what we chose not to name last night. For once, we are not rivals. We are witnesses to the same shadows.

My comm is lit. “Training. South Garden. 07:30. Mandatory.” Signed: Villin.

Not the brother. The Headmaster. REAPER’s commander. The man who has worn more secrets than anyone in this place for weeks, and still the mentor we respect because he’s the one who can get us home alive.

I strap light armor over my tactical gear, slip the short blade in its sheath, and double-check. Everything is in order. Everything is ready.

*Except my heart.*

We step out without another word. In the corridors, other REAPER members fall in line, some blinking sleep from their eyes, others already

bright with whatever fuel adrenaline gives them. Celeste is not with us. She never is. Since the first mission, when the Shades slipped through a crack in the portal and she was dragged back here, she hasn’t been allowed in the field. Officially, it’s a reevaluation. Unofficially, no one is brave enough to ask the question.

I feel the answer anyway. So does Andrei. Villin wants her protected. The rest of us don’t get the same luxury.

The South Garden opens ahead in a sweep of frost-rimmed grass and stone. Old trees stand like sentries, and beyond them, the containment walls hold the line between campus and wilderness. The place hums. Ley lines run under this ground, and everyone with a pulse for power can feel it. The sealed portal to Elmaris sits like a heart behind stone, a slow, steady throb at the edge of thought. It looks immovable, otherworldly, a structure caught between ideas, yet even seals breathe. Every so often, something slips. Fissures open. We hunt what gets through.

The real REAPER teams are deployed across the world. That leaves the command center in the hands of students. It’s a neat irony. Villin and Amias are the only ones here with real time and real blood on their records. Even they are learning the Shades' behavior as they fight them. No one under one-seventy-five has seen one until now.

We are long-lived, but not invincible. Vampires come closest. No illness touches us. Age does not end us. Decapitation does. So do a few other very specific ways to die, most of them ugly, which is why our kind is coveted in an Axis. In the Resonance Ritual, the circle inherits our span. Blessing or curse, depending on where you stand.

Villin is waiting on the flagstones. He wears black tactical gear with a sheen that catches the weak morning light. His combat boots are clean

enough to gleam. Hair in place. Eyes like poured silver as they cut across us.

“We are running a new tactical sim,” he barks. “Form triads. Your mission is to locate and isolate a theoretical Shade that escaped the outer perimeter. This is not a classroom drill. You will move through open terrain; you will be inside a dynamic environment; and the risks will be real.”

A cold stripe climbs my spine, same as the last time Celeste stood in this garden and the world shoved a real monster into our practice run.

“Has something happened?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Villin holds my look for a beat, long enough to tell me I touched the right wire. “This is a simulation. We prepare before the emergency arrives. We do not leave it to luck.”

His voice is level, but tension threads it. The hour, the proximity to the portal, and Celeste’s absence, enough said.

“Form up. Your clock starts in two minutes.”

We break and take our places. I get Andrei. And Cassandra.

Villin placed us together. I see it in the way his eyes track us as the garden redraws itself in his mind.

Cassandra flips her hair and gives us a slanted look. “Try not to slow me down.”

Andrei gives her nothing. I let the comment fall. There’s no time for her shit.

Villin lifts his hand. Power gathers in his palm, a low vibration that slides under my feet and up my spine. “Begin.”

The ground trembles. The training overlay rises like heat above stone and locks over the garden. Colors shift a degree off true. Edges soften and then sharpen. Sound comes a second early. It’s an augmented field, stable

enough for drills, flexible enough to bleed if something real presses through.

“Your objective,” Villin says, voice carrying clean across the teams, “intercept an escaped entity. Level three—Shade. It will disguise itself within living structures. It reacts to intention and to magic. Do not feed it. If it attacks, you respond without hesitation.”

We move through the gate of the overlay. The sim pulls us north, into taller trees and a floor carpeted with leaves the color of old coins. The air cuts clean. Winter is close enough to taste.

“I’ve got left,” Andrei says, already shifting weight to cover what I cannot see.

“I’ll take center,” I call.

“Fine. I’ll sweep right,” Cassandra snaps. “Don’t expect me to drag you out if you’re stupid.”

My jaw tightens. She’s fast, precise, lethal, the kind of good that gets people killed without warning. My stomach knots. Every nerve in me screams: watch, react, survive.

We pass a patch of ground that feels wrong. Soil churned, roots jutting like veins, frost catching in the seams. The hum thickens, curling around my bones. Ley energy pools and swirls, restless and impatient. My fingertips itch with the pull.

“Something shifted,” I whisper.

Andrei tilts his head. His shoulders tense with the same unease crawling up my spine.

“Left,” Andrei murmurs. The single word lands like a blade.

I see it. A darkness too dense to be mere shadow, still yet alive. It breathes. It drinks at the seam where the energy pulses. A real Shade, not a

construct. Every instinct says step back.

“What in—” The words dissolve on the wind.

“That isn’t part of the sim,” Andrei adds, voice taut as a drawn cord.

Cassandra freezes for the first time. Just a heartbeat, but enough. Then bone shivers beneath her skin, cloth tears. Her body bends, folds, reshapes. A silver wolf rises where she stood, hackles raised, teeth bared in a snarl that splits the silence.

“Do not engage,” I command, even as my own heart pounds with the hum. “It feeds on intention and on your life.”

Too late. The creature twists, remembering some phantom body of its own. A black limb lashes outward. Cassandra crashes to the frozen ground, human again, clutching herself as dark veins spider from where it touched.

Her scream bursts from her throat, raw and sharp, shattering the trees, the frost, the hum, stopping everything in its path. My chest tightens and my hands curl as the air trembles, the ley lines answering. Time fractures. My mind teeters between thought and instinct. Move, protect, watch, wait.

The shadow swirls, and I know this is no simulation. This is real. Every thread of magic, every shard of will, is on fire. I step closer, feeling the hum in my veins, every sense stretched to a razor’s edge. The forest itself holds its breath, waiting for the next heartbeat to decide which of us survives.

I freeze, held in the echo of Cassandra’s scream. Andrei doesn’t. He drops in front of her, blade out, stance sharp, perfect. That movement snaps something in me. Light and fast, I launch behind the entity, vampire speed carrying me through frost-slick air. Heat gathers in my palm. I unleash the shard of magic any vampire can wield. The circle flares, snapping shut around the creature. It shrieks, a sound that shouldn’t exist, jagged and raw

against the very fabric of the world. “Elias, focus,” Andrei commands. “Hold it.”

I lock my wrists, feeding the circle. The ring tightens, and for a few impossible beats, we have it. Frost blooms around our feet, stinging the skin. The air tastes sharp, electric.

“Now,” I call.

Andrei steps in, driving the onyx blade into the spot where the center pretends to be a heart. Darkness erupts, blooming outward like a star collapsing backward. The ground bucks. Trees lurch. The world bleeds white, then contracts in on itself.

Silence follows. Real silence. Birds freeze mid-song. Wind pauses. Even the forest considers whether to keep breathing.

My right side burns. I hit the ground hard, teeth gritted, and push up. The spot where the Shade fell is charred. The air hums with a tension you can feel more than hear.

We stand, listening. Nothing moves. That is wrong.

Cassandra is first to her feet, brushing herself off like we’re part of the scenery. Black veins still mark her skin. She pretends not to notice and slips into the trees without a word.

“Perfect,” I mutter.

Andrei lingers a moment longer, hand to his knee. When he finally lifts his gaze, the question I’m trying not to ask lives plain in his eyes.

“We shouldn’t have been here,” I say.

“I know.”

“It was a real breach. Not a controlled event.”

“I know.”

“Did Villin know?”

Andrei's eyes lock with mine. Fear curls there, sharp and alive, not for him, but for her. "If this one found a seam," he whispers, "what else is coming? And why does it always track us?"

I look down at the ground where the magic tore open. The earth quivers, vibrating like a string plucked too hard. Light stutters along the edges, trembling in jagged pulses, and color fractures across the frost. The field twists and bleeds, truth leaking into itself, unstable and hungry. Every hair on my arms lifts. The air hums with anticipation, as if the world is holding its breath, waiting for the next tear.

"Celeste shouldn't be kept off missions like this," I breathe, almost a thought. "Her healing isn't a luxury."

He exhales slowly. "Maybe that's why someone kept her off the roster. Maybe they didn't want her here when the veil thinned."

"You think Villin…"

"I think he knows more than he says. I don't believe he'd send us into a kill box on purpose."

I clench my fists, wishing I could hit something, a tree, the air, the problem itself.

"If we start lying to each other," I say, "we'll be dead before the next breach even opens."

Andrei nods. No anger, only the kind of exhaustion that comes from holding a line you know will break. The unspoken question hangs between us: who will protect Celeste if even we have to guess who to trust?

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**23**

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## ANDREI

The shadow is gone, but its echo sits heavy in our bones. We move through the dense trees with the care you use around a sleeping beast. The quiet is not peaceful. It’s a held breath.

Elias walks in front of me. He drifts for one step, then another, then his knees give out as if the forest floor has reached up and pulled him down.

“Elias?”

No answer. He falls to the ground, and the sound of it tears through me like my own body hitting stone. My chest seizes, a hollow echo where his breath should be. His training shirt clings wet to his side, dark and slick, fabric stained almost black.

I drop beside him, fingers fumbling at the hem, shoving it up. And then I see it. Goddess. My stomach lurches. The wound isn’t just blood. It gleams with an oily translucence, thin as glass, yet alive, shifting, refusing light.

Shade. Not just in his flesh. It has clawed deeper, into him, into us. I feel it thrumming in the marrow of my own bones, a cold hand already testing where it can reach me through him.

“No,” I rasp, but it comes out more like a prayer than a word. My hands press down anyway, as if pressure alone could seal spirit back into skin. “You don’t get to leave me. You hear me? We’re getting you back. Now.”

I don’t think. I just move. One heave and he’s over my shoulder. Too easy. He has never been easy to lift. Something inside me buckles at that.

His breath touches the back of my neck. Shallow. Ragged. I take the forest in strides, but the ground won’t hold still. Slopes shift. Roots claw at my boots. I don’t slow down. I can’t.

He feels wrong. Too light. Too quiet.

Not him. Not my twin. The one person who has always been there, even when we stood on opposite sides of the same line. Even when we wanted the same woman. I can live with the fights. I can’t live without him.

Branches cut across my arms. Frost scorches down my throat. My chest feels hollow, scraped raw. I keep running. The Academy walls lift through the trees, distant, unreal, and I swear the sight alone nearly drops me.

His body goes limp against mine, muscles surrendering all at once. The sudden heaviness crashes into me: flesh turned to stone, warm skin already cooling.

“No. Goddess, no. Not him. Not like this.”

This cannot be how the story ends. Not for him. Not when there were still so many pages left unturned.

Two REAPERs step out from a side path, eyes narrowing, then widening when they see what I carry. They move as if to take him.

“Call a Healer, now. Non-sim entity. He has been touched by a Shade,” I snap.

They run without question. Good. Until he’s safe, no one lays a hand on him but me.

The courtyard stones pound beneath my boots, each strike a reminder that he’s still here, still on my shoulder. His blood seeps hot through the uniform, soaking into my skin. The scent coils up the back of my throat, stirring a hunger I know too well. Wrong hunger. I force it down. Not now. Never with him.

The infirmary doors read us and slide open. Sterile air rushes out, antiseptic sharpened by the bitter edge of scorched herbs. Beneath it hums the faint resonance of crystal arrays.

“We’ve got a gravely injured operative,” I shout. “Shade penetration. Spirit contact.”

They converge quickly. White coats move with trained efficiency, hands steady, eyes dulled from endless repetition. One tall woman leads, her irises pale as milk from magic overuse. She raises a hand toward the suspension bed, voice crisp and practiced. “Release your hold. Let the field take him.”

I lower him carefully, slower than they expect. The bed’s wards catch his weight, lifting him in a controlled float. Strips of light trace across his body, parting fabric with surgical precision until the wound lies fully exposed.

And then I see it. The mark isn’t just torn flesh. It looks both frozen and burned, ringed in shifting color, red, black, back to red. Something in it moves. Something in it feeds.

“We need a three-layer intervention. Blood. Mind. Spirit,” another Healer announces.

“What does that mean?” The question leaves me before I can stop it. My voice sounds steadier than I feel.

No one answers. A clerk unlocks a low chest and draws out vials glowing like captured sunlight. Another kneels to place smooth stones in a precise

ring, each one releasing a soft chime as it touches tile. Hands hover, align, press down. The hum thickens in the air.

But all I hear is Elias. The ragged pull of his breath. The silence between pulls.

“Stay with me, Elias.”

A crystal the size of a fist, clouded like storm glass, descends to his sternum. The field flares. His body arcs upward. A sound tears from him, half-name, half-cry. It could be Celeste. It could be pain. Either way, it cuts straight through me.

The door slams open.

“Elias.”

Villin stands framed in the threshold, shoulders squared, composure split wide enough for panic to show. Steel in his eyes, but beneath it something raw, something close to breaking. He takes in the wound, and his face goes feral, already hunting for someone to blame.

“Who put him in a live breach?” His voice cracks like thunder.

“You did.” The growl comes from somewhere older than reason. My fangs press sharply against my tongue. The room tastes of blood, and I want the fight as much as I want the pulse of my brother’s vein.

Villin’s gaze locks on mine. For a moment, he falters, as if he’s stepped to a cliff edge with no ground beneath. Grief, guilt, fury, helplessness, all of it flickers in his silver eyes before he forces it down. He moves past me and lowers his hand to Elias’s forehead, the touch so careful it barely stirs a hair.

“Not him.” Villin’s voice breaks on the second word. “Not my brother.”

“Patient is under therapy,” the lead Healer says, not lifting her eyes from the glow web holding Elias in place. “The Shade consumed part of his vital link. If we don’t rebuild the spirit layer within the hour, we lose the line.”

“Tell me what you need,” Villin answers, already leaning forward. “Blood. Power. Will.”

“Not yours,” the white-eyed woman cuts in. Her tone is calm, but her hand tightens on the crystal. “You are unstable. Your aura would flood his with chaos. We’re working off-books already. None of us has treated a true Shade strike in over a century. If you stay inside the ward, you increase the risk.”

Villin stills. It looks like he has stopped breathing. “Then what remains?” The words sound scraped hollow.

“A soul connection. Or a divine one,” another Healer says without looking up from the light spiraling under her palms. “Pray to Saeris if you want. But what we require is an anchor we don’t have.”

Useless. The word turns through my head like a curse. I watch three Healers move in, their steps forming a circle as tight as a snare. Their hands lift, their voices braid. Threads of light spool into bands of pale gold and smoke-blue, binding themselves across Elias’s chest. For a heartbeat, his skin takes the light. Then it rejects it. Veins blacken along his throat, spreading like ink in water. Two of the crystals gutter. One splits with a muted crack and drops in a scatter of milky shards.

“What is happening?” My voice is not steady anymore.

“His soul is rejecting the healing,” the lead Healer answers, her jaw set. “The Shade left a signature that will not release. This is corruption at the level of the soul. We attempt inversion.”

Villin edges closer. I have seen him in fury, in command, in control. Never like this. His face is carved hollow with terror.

“What did you do?” The words come low, edged with something sharp enough to cut.

“I did not send him into a breach.” My voice shakes, but I make no effort to hide it. “I did not ignore the portal’s condition. That was your call.”

“You know nothing of what I have carried to keep those things out.”

“And yet one is here,” I snap, “feeding on my brother.”

We could end each other in this room with nothing but words. I can feel it in the air, the pull toward violence. The Healers shout for space, but I do not hear them until one cries out, panicked, that we are losing him.

Everything sharpens.

Elias hangs a hand’s breadth above the bed, body trembling inside the ward’s hold. His chest rises, falls, then falters. The constellation of crystals dims, star by star, as if the night is closing its fist.

I thought carrying him out of the forest meant we'd won. If I could drag him here, professionals would do what I could not. But the Shade plays by other rules.

My knees hit the tile. Cold seeps through. I press my palms flat, as if pinning myself down so I don’t reach for him and tear the fragile work apart. My throat burns. I do something I have not done since childhood. I speak to a goddess I am not sure is even listening.

*Take me instead. Take years from me. Take anything that is not him.*

The room answers only with silence. Silence and the hiss of a crystal dissolving into dust.

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## ELIAS

The world rolls and then slides away. I am in the part of the dark that doesn't feel empty. Something hums underneath it. It’s the sound the portal makes at midnight when the wind drops. I float because I cannot cling to anything.

I try to name what I am losing, and can't remember the word. I try to say Andrei, and it comes out as a breath. I try to make a promise, and the promise has no lips to live on.

A warmth touches the edges of the cold. It smells like cedar. It tastes like the first kiss I did not mess up by talking. It feels like a hand on the back of my neck, steady, sure.

Celeste.

If I go, someone needs to tell her the kiss wasn't a mistake. It was the last time I felt like I was a whole thing and not pieces pretending to be one.

Not yet. Not like this.

The cold answers by closing in.

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## CELESTE

The sun barely brushes the wrought-iron lattice of the inner court, a cold light washing the white stones with a promise that never holds. Mint bruises against porcelain, and the dry sweetness of petal tea hangs in the air. Lys and I share a stone bench by the fountain; she keeps stirring her mug without drinking.

“You’re strangely quiet today,” I say, pulling my hood up as the wind sneaks under it and tugs at my hair.

Lys lets out a sigh so heavy it belongs on a stage. “Quiet? Hardly. I’m grieving. I gave Kiran my very best effort—charm, wit, a smile so sharp it could cut glass—and in return, I was gifted with the most flawless ghosting in magical history. Three messages seen. Zero replies. Not even a pathetic excuse like, *‘Sorry, accidentally set my phone on fire.’* Nothing.”

I almost laugh, but it barely reaches past my lips. “Maybe he’s paralyzed by your charm.”

She narrows her eyes, mock-scandalized. “Exactly. The poor man. Overwhelmed. Utterly undone. Reduced to silence. I should send flowers.

Or perhaps a condolence note: *Here lies Kiran, slain by Lys's irresistible brilliance.*

"Or he's an idiot who doesn't know what he wants. Honestly, Cel, I caught myself staring at Natrix during drills. Natrix. The man looks like he was raised by shadows and bathes in his enemies' blood."

"Natrix?" I arch a brow.

She blushes, then laughs at herself.

"At least he has no illusions. He doesn't promise, he doesn't flirt, he just exists. And the way he commands those shadows… I dreamt last night he pulled me into the dark and—actually, you don't want the details."

"I do," I say, feigning innocence.

"You don't. But I'd trade one night of my life for one with him. Just one. For the science."

I try to picture Lys—bright hair, quick mouth, relentless hope—folded into Natrix's arms. The image refuses to land.

"And then what?" I ask. "A polite thank-you, and you send him back to his gloom?"

"Exactly. I'll write a review in my journal. *Perilous but satisfying. Five stars. Best enjoyed with scented candles.*"

We both laugh, but my chest doesn't loosen. Pressure builds there the way a storm gathers behind a heat haze. Maybe because I haven't seen Elias in two days. Maybe because Andrei has said nothing. Amias avoids me with clockwork precision. Villin is Villin. He sets a mug of coffee in front of me every morning, then retreats to the far end of the table with his paper. We drink in silence that feels carved. I hate his quiet almost as much as his blade-edged words.

But I feel him. Always watching from doorways, a patient sentinel with a will of stone. Training is a map of restrained touches and swallowed breath. When his fingers correct my stance, my blood answers. When his eyes catch mine, my lungs forget their work. The cut of him might as well be carved out of night. I shiver.

“Hey,” Lys says more gently. “Any word from Elias? Or Villin?”

“No.” The truth hurts harder once spoken.

“Everything’s too quiet,” she murmurs. “Not the peaceful kind. The before-the-explosion kind.”

“I know. I feel like I’m standing in the center, and no one will tell me when it starts.”

She squeezes my hand.

“Whatever shadows they bring, you light the ground you stand on. If you want to talk, or run, or get drunk and pretend you’re an exiled queen with catastrophic taste in men, I’m here.”

“That sounds suspiciously personal,” I tease, but without heat.

“Because it is. And because, hell, at least Natrix’s shadows won’t break my heart. They’ll just keep it suspended.”

We laugh again—until the wind shifts.

The scent hits wrong. Burnt blood. Torn magic. One false note in a familiar song, sweet in the worst way.

Our eyes lock.

“You felt that?”

“Yes.” Her voice trembles. I can’t tell if it’s her empathy or my panic.

I know before anyone says it. Words are useless. The truth drops through me, cold and complete.

Elias is in danger.

I might already be too late.

I stand too quickly and my foot slips on the wet stone. Lys rises with me, knocking the mugs as she nearly tangles her coat on the bench.

“Celeste, where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” I call back, breath already short. “I just know I have to move.”

I run without a plan, without a path, driven only by the weight pressing at my chest. The arcades stretch ahead like a fever dream, the Academy’s angles tilting a fraction off true. The air carries the scent of copper and panic, sharp enough to sting. Every step hammers the same message: hurry, and it will not be enough.

I collide with someone so hard it rattles my teeth.

“Celeste,” a voice cuts through.

There is no chance to dodge. My face strikes against a chest that smells of wool, ash, and parchment, layered with something deeper, something enduring. Amias.

“What are you—”

He grips my shoulders with both hands, steadying me. His hair clings damp to his temples, his eyes lit with a burning focus that makes it hard to breathe. A charge rides his skin, as if he has stepped out of a storm and carried its weight with him.

“You need to come with me. Now.”

“What happened? Elias—is he—”

“Not dead. Not yet. But something is wrong, and every second we lose drags the line in the wrong way.”

“What kind of wrong?”

“I’ve watched too many futures,” he answers, breath uneven. “If Elias dies, the fissure at the Elmaris portal tears wider. The ley lines shudder, the veil collapses. It doesn’t end there. It cascades, one break unraveling the next.”

“It makes no sense. Amias, I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. What matters is this: you are the catalyst. The branch everything turns on. If he falls, the balance shatters.”

“Then why say nothing? Why keep this buried?”

His gaze shadows, heavy with something older than grief. For a heartbeat, he looks older than time itself.

“Because I couldn’t. The visions wouldn’t release me. Saeris called, and I saw fragments no one should have to carry. It split me open. I’m only now holding the pieces together.”

“Saeris chose you,” I whisper. “Why you?”

“Because you aren’t the only living mark between worlds. Because what you are isn’t only royal blood. You don’t see the whole of it yet. You stand between ruin and what might still be saved.”

I shake like a leaf, shoving the fear down where it can’t choke me. Lys hovers at my shoulder, eyes wide as saucers, but she keeps her distance.

“What do I do?”

The bravery in my voice feels borrowed. “Tell me.”

He exhales, a sound almost like relief. “Come with me. To him. Before the crystals fail and there’s nothing left to pull back.”

My stomach drops, but I grit my teeth.

“Then let’s get moving.”

We run. Stairs flash beneath our feet. The infirmary rises ahead, all glass and stone, looming and impossible to miss. My heart hammers; my breath

scrapes against my ribs. The corridors smell of incense gone bitter, antiseptic, and hot metal. My boots strike the floor in a rhythm that hurts. Steel doors wait at the end. A giant of a man in a healer's mantle stands before them, robes white and bright with glowing sigils tracing his temples.

"I have to go in," I say. "Elias is inside."

"Access is restricted," he answers, voice flat, impassive. "Family by blood and healers in the ritual only."

Amias appears, Lys on his heels. He hasn't caught his breath. "Let her through. She is—"

"You don't have clearance either, Seer," the man interrupts. "Orders from the ritual lead. No entry until stabilization."

Amias curses under his breath and pivots away, already calling someone, likely Villin, with Lys following after him.

I stay. My hands are shards of tremor. My lungs burn; my heart thrashes as if trying to escape my chest. Every inch of me is awake, raw, screaming, while the core of me is ripped from within. The walls close in; the floor might shatter under the weight of what I feel. I cannot pause. I cannot obey. I cannot breathe.

"Let me in," I say again.

"No."

"If you don't move—" I stop. There is no threat I can name that fits.

"You will not enter, Miss Nightmoor."

Something cracks inside me. My vision narrows, sparks flickering at the edges like fire trapped in glass. Reason slips away. I am pure pain and fear, the animal that wakes when a trap snaps shut.

Time stretches. Every heartbeat hammers in my skull, every breath slices my ribs. The walls press closer; the floor tilts beneath me. The world slows

to a pulse of instinct and terror.

“Five seconds,” I whisper, stepping forward. “Five. Four.”

“Leave now,” he snaps, turning toward the console. “Or I will restrain you for interfering with an emergency procedure.”

I don’t think—I detonate. Thought disintegrates, leaving only instinct. I surge forward, the air tearing cold across my face, the sting of ozone sharp in my throat. My hands catch his collar, fabric rasping against my skin. My fist knots tight, knuckles burning as it collides with the side of his head. The crack reverberates through bone and air alike, echoing in my ears. He reels backward, eyes wide, disbelief bleeding into fear.

“Are you insane?”

“If he dies, I will end you,” I growl. The voice is mine and not mine, a fracture of everything I am.

“It won’t be my fault!” he shouts. “And if you go in now, it might be!”

I tremble so hard my teeth chatter. I am a caged creature, a queen without a crown, my heart laid bare on the table, the world pressing in, strangers standing between it and me. My pulse pounds in my head; my lungs feel on fire; adrenaline floods through me, raw and sharp.

The far door slams open, and heavy steps thunder across the floor. A voice cuts through everything like wildfire. Villin.

“What’s going on here?”

His gaze cuts the corridor in two. I can manage only one sentence.

“Elias is dying, and I can’t do anything.”

Villin freezes. He looks heavier, darker, than I’ve ever seen him. He lifts his eyes to the red-haired healer, and the whole hall seems to hold its breath.

“What is your name?” he asks, low and unnervingly calm.

“Healer Tael,” the man says, realizing too late that the damage has already been done.

“Healer Tael, listen carefully. If you ever again refuse access to a royal bloodline, to the future head of the Council, you will spend the rest of your career tending frostbitten REAPERs in northern Siberia. Do you understand me?”

Tael swallows hard and steps aside. The door unlocks on its own, acknowledging Villin’s authority.

“Miss Nightmoor has access. Always,” Villin says, then turns to me.

For a moment, he is not the commander. He is broken. I see it in the set of his jaw, in eyes that fight against their own weight.

“This isn’t your fault,” he says quietly. “If the fissure wins, if what’s coming through cannot be held, we lose him anyway. We lose all of us. One by one.”

“We’re not losing him,” I say, stepping forward.

Red light washes the room. Diagnostic crystals strobe and crack. Healers move in fast, precise lines around the bed. Patterns on the floor pulse offbeat, as if the music itself can’t find its rhythm.

Elias lies pale in the center. Black veins creep up his throat like a living disease. His lips are the color of smoke. His eyes are closed, as if he is dreaming something that eats him from the inside.

Andrei stands braced in a corner, back against the wall, his gaze a silent scream. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t speak. A crystal cracks, snapping the air. A healer swears.

“Resonance is failing. It’s slipping.”

“Another crystal. Now.”

“We’re out of time.”

I come apart from the inside. A thin warding field keeps me from him, but it might as well be a mile of ice. My knees give in, and I let them. I collapse before the invisible barrier, crying first quietly, then with stuttering, jagged breaths that tear through me.

“Please,” I whisper to no one and to Saeris both. “If you are there, if you have ever been, take it from me. Take anything. Don’t let him die.”

Another crystal gives way. Lines of light jitter across the floor. The air shifts without warning, like the gasp after holding your breath too long.

I lift my head, searching for grace, but there is none. No light descends, no soft miracle touches the room. One by one, the crystals shatter, small stars dying with thin, sharp cries. Healers shout as the air fills with chaos, and control slips entirely from their hands. The warding field collapses around us.

Something tears through the room, vibrating straight through me. Elias’s soul loosens, and I feel it as vividly as I feel my own limbs. A thin, warm thread of smoke rises from his chest, climbing toward the high ceiling.

My heart shatters in a sound I cannot hear.

The room erupts around us. Villin shifts into what he keeps buried: stone and wing, a gargoyle barely held to a man’s frame. The healers recoil, and he lunges for the bed, only to be met by Andrei, who reaches him first.

“You,” Andrei roars. “You sent him.”

“Not now,” someone yells. But it’s too late.

Andrei’s fist cracks against Villin’s jaw. Villin shoves him back, and chairs and glass scatter in every direction. For a moment, the infirmary is no longer a room; it is a battlefield carved from grief.

I move. My body decides for me. Logic is a luxury I cannot afford. Love is the only currency left, or loss, which is love twisted inside out.

Clarity cuts through me like a drawn blade. Healing cannot touch what a Shade corrupts. That magic devours the spirit first. Crystals and chants cannot catch what has already slipped through the seams. Another part of me awakens, tasting like winter and iron.

I step across shards, blood, and the heat of failing wards, and place my hand on him.

His skin is cold. Unnatural cold.

“Elias,” I whisper. “Elias.”

The name burns my mouth as tears run unchecked.

“I forbid you to die. Enough people have left me. Not you. Not like this.”

I don’t know what comes next. I only know we have one chance left, and it is not in any book, in any teaching.

Something cracks open inside me.

Cold floods my spine, laced with fire. My breath locks. My fingers clamp around his wrist. The room goes black for a heartbeat, then every shattered crystal flares with a light I have never seen before, gold rimmed with obsidian.

Power spills from me like a breath I have been holding since birth. The healers freeze mid-step. Andrei and Villin pivot as one, their eyes wide with fear.

I am not only Celeste.

An old light rises beneath my skin, a spiral of bone and night, the mark of the necromancers. The power I thought lost—the power I refused—recognizes me as its own.

“Give him back.”

My voice carries more than words. It carries the women in my blood, my mother, the grandmother I never knew, the queen who closed a gate and

died on the wrong side of it, the ones the Council called dangerous for loving too much.

Elias's lashes tremble.

A white thread descends from the ceiling like breath in cold air, sinking into his chest. Color bleeds back into his cheeks. The black lines fade, as if something unseen is pulling them home.

One of the healers drops to her knees.

"May the goddess keep us," she whispers.

Not the goddess. Me.

Blood runs from my nose. Heat and cold flare through me at once. I do not let go. I hold him with both hands, a tether, a bridge, while life returns to him—slow, brutal, real.

He inhales. His throat works. His mouth opens on a soundless scream.

"C-Celeste," he manages.

I fold over him and let the weight take me.

Somewhere inside, the part that has always known more than I wanted whispers that this is a beginning, not an end. What I have called will cost us. What I am will change everything.

He is alive.

And I am what fate named in the dark.

A necromancer. Born of death. A giver of life.

No one will stop me now.

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## VILLIN

I watch her collapse against Elias's chest, spent and shaking, her face streaked with tears and yet oddly peaceful in a way I have never seen on her. I move before anyone can speak. I do not ask permission. I lift her into my arms. She is light, far too light for the weight she carries. Her head drops to my shoulder; her hand stays half-reached behind us, as if even in sleep she tries to hold on to him.

A healer steps in.

"We need to examine her. The ritual may have affected her system."

I look at him until the color drains from his face.

"Not here. Not in front of everyone. No one touches her."

The room stays tight with tension, but no one argues. I am not only a commander in this place. I sit on the Council. And for her, I am more than I am ready to admit.

At the door, I pause. Her breath warms my collarbone, steady yet fragile, as if one wrong move might scatter it. Another healer, a woman this time, approaches with deliberate care.

“Villin, please. If something has torn inside and we delay, we may be too late.”

I hold Celeste closer and wait for the space of a heartbeat before nodding. I do not set her down. I carry her into the treatment room and keep her in my lap in the corner while they lean close with trembling hands, checking her pulse, her pupils, the ebb of her energy.

“She is stable,” the healer says at last. “Exhausted, but the power… that is undeniable.”

“That power belongs to one bloodline,” another murmurs. “Royal. Pure necromancy. Dominion over life and death is not learned. It is inherited.”

The silence that follows curdles the air. I feel every pair of eyes sliding toward me. They want me to explain her, to contain her, to let their fear have structure.

I look down at Celeste instead, her head resting against me, her body drained by what she gave. She is mine to guard, not theirs to question.

“You already knew who she was,” I say, my voice low, weighted with the fury I do not raise. “Now that you have witnessed what she carries, *understand this*. The disrespect you showed her will never happen again. Not while I breathe.”

I rise with her in my arms. This time, no one dares to speak. With my free hand, I open a portal. Golden light blooms, a brief, blinding flare, the ripple of a familiar presence brushing over my skin. We step through. Darkness folds away into the muted glow of my living room.

My house holds close to its shadows. Wall lamps spill soft halos that pool in the corners. Vanilla and old whiskey linger in the air, and beneath them, the faintest thread of her—floral, clean, a promise I have no right to crave.

I take the stairs slowly. The wood sighs under our weight. Her breath ghosts against my collarbone in a rhythm so fragile it feels like it might vanish if I shift too quickly. Every step becomes a vow not to jar her, not to wake her, not to let the world touch her while she lies in my arms.

I turn first toward her room. I prepared it myself, down to the last hinge and fold. Cool linens, soft throws, curtains that move like a dream when the night wind finds them. At the threshold, I stop. I cannot leave her there. Not tonight. She looks too breakable, too lost. The honesty of that truth lands sharp and undeniable, and I do not dress it in excuses. I turn toward my own room.

The door recognizes me. The lamps lift as my signature brushes the frame, softening the austere edge of the space. Black carved wood, a velvet canopy, dark paneling, old portraits, an obsidian chandelier—my sanctum, equal parts throne room and crypt.

I look down at her face, pale in the low light, her lashes dark against her skin. She feels impossibly small in my arms. I fear that even this bed, built for my weight, might swallow her whole.

A bed fit for a king. Or a monster. On most nights, I no longer know which one lies here. Tonight, I only know that if I am not careful, I could be the hand that breaks her.

The room itself feels like a snare, dark walls swallowing what little light dares to touch them, velvet curtains heavy as if they, too, have surrendered to gravity. The air is thick with resin and smoke, the kind that clings to skin and hair and leaves its mark long after one has fled.

She lies in the center of it all, pale against the black sheets, fragile in a way that claws at me. Too still. Too breakable. I watch the rise and fall of her chest as if the air might desert her the moment I look away. The thought

that I could ruin her without meaning to is vicious. I could splinter her even in rest.

I lower myself into the chair in the corner, its carved arms cold beneath my palms. The distance is deliberate, from here I can watch her chest rise, measure each fragile breath, keep my hands where they belong.

Yet the chair might as well be iron bars. My fingers curl into fists against the wood, knuckles white with the strain of holding still. I press my spine into the backrest until it aches, anchoring myself in the discomfort, because if I lean forward, if I so much as reach, I will touch her.

The room conspires against me. The chandelier drips its dim glow like candlewax down the walls, portraits brood from their frames, and velvet curtains whisper with the draft. All of it feels predatory, an echo of me, waiting to consume what she is.

And there she lies, soft as breath, fragile as a promise. The pale flame against my dark. Every rise of her chest pulls me nearer in thought if not in body.

My whole frame hums with the ache to move, to close the distance, to claim what I am not allowed.

So I sit, fists locked, back pressed to wood, breathing like a man fighting his own cage.

I scrub a palm over my face. I, Saint Villin, have fallen for the daughter of the man I swore to despise until my last breath. Nightmoor, a strategist with two faces, a commander who trafficked in terror and control. I know in my bones he helped put my father in the ground. Yet this woman—his blood—has splintered the iron certainty I built myself from. Not because she is beautiful, though she is. Because she dares. She risks. She burns with the ruinous courage to love and to defy even death.

For Elias.

For us?

No. I cannot soften. Not after what ripped through me the first time she touched me. Not after watching her kneel in firelight, calling Elias back from an abyss none of us could have reached.

The darker thing in me, the part that learned to rule by silence and steel, wants to punish her. Not for being wrong but for wagering everything without thought of consequence. For breaking the command. For breaking mine. The thought coils low and primitive. I imagine bending her across my knee and marking her perfect skin with my hand until the lesson holds. Control, not fury. Desire, yes, and fear.

Fear that I am already losing her. Fear that if I reach for her, if I claim her, she will see what I am and never forgive it.

I press my back hard into the chair, and it groans beneath me. My hands clamp around the carved arms until my knuckles ache, the wood biting into my palms. My muscles lock, every tendon drawn tight, holding myself in place, holding myself from crossing the room, from letting the predator loose. My body hums with restraint, every nerve wired, every inch of me straining against what I want.

I close my eyes and inhale. Her scent threads the room, soft flowers tangled with a hint of cinnamon. It winds through the whiskey and vanilla soaked into this place and turns them into something I could live on. My vice. My ruin.

Tomorrow she will wake. Her eyes will find mine, sharp and unflinching, demanding truths I am not sure I possess. Every question she asks will carry the weight of everything we have survived, everything I have let slip through my hands, everything I can’t yet explain.

I imagine her gaze tracing me, piercing the calm I have tried to maintain, and I feel the pull of it like a tether around my chest. My body aches to reach for her, to offer comfort, but I cannot move. I cannot let my hunger or my fear—or the darker part of me—claim her in a way she does not deserve.

I will sit through the night, counting the beats of her breath, waiting for her to awaken, knowing that when she does, she will expect the whole of me. And I am not certain I have enough of myself to give. Not yet.

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## CELESTE

I wake with the taste of metal in my mouth and a weight in my chest that is neither fatigue nor pain. It sits deeper than both, an absence, as if something essential was lifted out and burned in a ritual too real to be imagined.

The room smells like vanilla. Beneath it lingers something familiar as my own heartbeat. Whiskey aged in oak. Danger. Villin.

I open my eyes slowly. Light slips through heavy curtains, stained red by the hour. The bed is enormous. Black sheets, soft under my fingers, still carry the ghost of a night I cannot decide if I dreamed or survived.

He is not here.

I push myself up carefully and feel silk against my skin. The pajamas are not mine. He would never leave that to chance. He chose them. He imagined this moment, me waking in this bed, in his house.

My hand moves through my hair. It is clean and dry. Someone took care of me. Someone made sure I was safe.

Villin.

And still he is not beside me.

I rise and take in the room. A gothic sanctuary, carved dark furniture, stained glass, turning the morning into blood-colored light. A massive painting dominates the far wall, a leafless tree on canvas older than anything I have ever seen.

The mirror stops me.

It’s not the silk or the shadows under my eyes or the pale skin. It’s the look in my own eyes, the hard weight of someone who has walked through a fire the goddess herself could not put out.

I step closer and touch the glass. My reflection does not falter. I do.

I saved him. What did it cost?

My heart skips. Elias. I remember the shout, the explosion of light, shattered crystals, my voice begging Saeris for mercy. Saeris did not answer. Something else did. Something inside me woke.

The power rose again.

The memory is incomplete, yet the sensation lingers in full. Elias’s soul slipping like smoke. My body reaching for him, guided only by will, and pulling it back.

Cold presses against my skin. So does guilt.

Not because I saved him. Because, for that one moment, I thought of no one else. Not of Andrei, watching me unravel. Not of Amias, all warning and prophecy. Not even of Villin.

Villin, who was gone when I opened my eyes. Villin, who carried me here, dressed me, hid me from the world, and then left me to wake alone.

Why?

I open the door. The halls are silent. I pass a painting of the Council crest and a shelf of forbidden texts that hum faintly under my fingertips. His

house is more than a house. It is a fortress. It is a statement on power.

And yet it carries warmth in ways I do not expect.

At the foot of the stairs, I see him in the kitchen. A cup of coffee sends steam curling into the air. A report lies open beside it. Shades. Elias. Something worse. He has not noticed me, not yet.

So I watch him from the quiet of the stairs. Villin is more than the imposing commander who took me by force with steady hands. He is more than the man who dressed me in silk and carried me through a portal. He is also the one who shoulders fear at his back and a war at his front and still keeps his face still.

I step into the doorway. He sits with his back to me in the cold light, shirt drawn neatly across his shoulders, dark hair pushed carelessly from his brow. The room is precise to the inch. Control inhabits it the way breath inhabits a body. Coffee scents the air, mingling with the faint tang of singed magic. He has been here all night.

“You're awake.” His voice is calm, stretched to the limit.

I cross to the table, bare feet brushing the wood, and slide into the chair where a second cup waits.

“Elias?”

“He lives. For now.”

“You ran,” I say, throwing the words like knives. “You put me in your bed, dressed me in clothes that are not mine, then left.”

He shifts, fingers brushing the cup, gripping it tighter, as if holding himself together through sheer will. “I had things to resolve.”

“You always do.”

“You don't understand.”

“Then make me.”

He finally turns, and the look in his eyes slices through me, sharp enough to carve stone.

“I did not run from you, Celeste. I ran from what I see when I look at you.”

Air leaves my lungs. “And what is that?”

“An illusion. A power you cannot yet hold. An inheritance capable of breaking everything we have left. A queen who does not know why the portal closed and split two worlds in the first place.”

The words land where I am most vulnerable. I know why the portal closed. I know why I walked away that night. I will not tell him. Not yet. Maybe never.

“Then tell me what you know.”

“It is not yours to know.”

“It is. I am Elmaris’s heir.”

“You think that means power. It means debt. It means death. It means betrayal and jealousy that can seal a world shut. Your father did not close that door to end a war. He closed it to stop your mother. He could not stand that she was sovereign while he was only her consort, her Echo.”

His fingers bite into the edge of the table. The wood groans. The muscles in his forearm lock, coiling with restraint. I watch him hold himself back from moving toward me, from closing the distance between us, and I realize that even now he carries the weight of every threat, every loss, every decision he has ever made. He has chosen to contain it all, for me, for Elias, for whatever fragile peace still hangs in the air.

My pulse pounds. He knows enough. He has influence and reach, a dozen ways to undo a broken order, and he sits on the truth as if it were a sword he will draw when it suits him. Anger coils in me, hot and raw.

He does not pause.

“So don't lecture me about pain,” he says, voice steady but sharp. “Do not teach me absence. I know what it is to be left outside. I know what it is to watch someone love a whole world more than they will ever love you.”

I grip the arms of the chair as if I could ground myself through the wood. “You do not even know me, Villin.”

“I know you better than you think.” He leans forward, elbows on his knees, eyes dark, cutting. “I was there the first time you walked into Axis Spire. You trembled, but your control did not slip. I was there when you threw truth across a room that expected you to lower your eyes. I was there when you gave a piece of your soul to pull Elias back. I was afraid. Afraid that if I touched you, I would forget why I started any of this.”

I exhale sharply, trying to keep my hands still. “What did you start?”

He hesitates long enough to be honest. “To contain you. To keep you at a distance. To master what you make in me. Because if I don't, I will love you.”

The air between us cracks, fragile and charged, like glass under pressure.

“And what would be so terrible about that?” I whisper. I need to hear it, to see it in him.

“I cannot love the daughter of the man who put my father in the ground. I cannot love danger. And yet I hate myself, because I do.”

Heat stings my eyes.

“You think I do not feel.” My voice breaks just enough to let him hear it. “You think I am not fracturing every time you all stand around me, and I do not know how to be with you without losing myself. None of us will walk out of this whole.”

He does not answer. His chest rises and falls unevenly. His jaw tightens.

“Maybe this is Stockholm syndrome,” I breathe. “Maybe you are my captor. If I am a prisoner, the chains are made of something even the goddess cannot break.”

Villin flinches almost imperceptibly, as if the words touch him deeper than he intends. His eyes darken, and I see it. The part of him that battles himself, that restrains every impulse toward me, every confession. I have seen fear in men, in armies, in death itself. This fear, raw and tethered to me, is unlike anything else.

He moves closer, slow and deliberate, until the space between us feels like heat and wire. His fingers curl around my wrist.

“The chains are not yours,” he says, voice low, almost dangerous. “They are mine. And I am starting to think I will hang myself with them on purpose.”

We hold each other’s gaze. Only our ragged breaths break the silence.

Chaos thrums under my skin, wild and unmanageable. Beneath it, a steadier thread tightens, tethered to him.

He stands close enough that I feel his heat along my arms. He does not close the last inch. His grip on my wrist is the only anchor. His eyes burn into mine, carrying control and desire, and something darker, all held in check.

“Tell me you do not feel it,” he murmurs, almost pleading.

“I would be lying,” I admit.

The last bit of distance snaps.

He pulls me forward and erases the space like it is a wound he can finally stitch closed. His mouth crashes against mine, hungry and brutal, refusing restraint. This kiss does not ask. It does not negotiate. It takes what we have both tried to bury. I give in fully, matching him, because in this suspended

moment, the world disappears. There is only him. Only the fire that has smoldered under every argument, every stolen look, every near touch.

He lifts me with a force that could break me if he wanted, or save me if he chose. My legs coil around him, anchoring, as if I could tether him to me. When we part, our breaths are ragged. The tension does not leave the room. Fear hums between us, sharp and electric.

“We will regret this,” he growls, voice rough, but he does not step back.

“Probably,” I whisper, brushing my fingers along his cheek. “Just not today.”

I lean in again. This time, he answers fully, hands sliding over my face, down my waist, gripping me like he might never let go. He lifts me onto the long kitchen table, and the cold wood against my bare thighs sharpens the fire that consumes us. His fingers fumble at the first button of my shirt while his mouth drags along my throat, leaving a trail of heat and possession. A low, primal sound rumbles from him, and I hook my hands into his hair like a lifeline, pulling him closer, needing the weight and heat of him.

The door opens.

“Villin.”

Amias.

His voice is frayed, hurried, loaded with fury barely held in check. He stands in the doorway, green eyes flaring like a man who has lost a war he swore he could win.

“What are you—”

Andrei and Elias step in behind him.

Andrei is composed as ever, but his gaze is as sharp as a blade. Elias looks like he crawled out of a grave, color drained, eyes shadowed by everything

the infirmary took. His gaze drops to my unfastened shirt, to the way I perch on the table, to Villin's hands at my waist.

The silence that follows is heavier than any blow.

"I cannot believe this," Elias whispers, voice tight with disbelief. "After everything."

I slide off the table, fumbling at my buttons, fingers clumsy and shaking.

"Elias—"

"Save it," Andrei cuts in. "This is not new for you, is it?"

The words sting, not for their accusation, but for the calm certainty behind them.

"This is not about you," I say softly. "It never was."

"Wrong," Amias says, voice ice-sharp. "Everything is about you. The catalyst. The heir. The queen who does not even know what she wants."

"Enough," Villin says, and his tone fills the room like a gathering storm. "You walked into my house without knocking. You interrupted what was not yours."

"And Elias almost died," Andrei snaps, eyes flicking to me. "And you were here. Like this."

"I did not know," I breathe. "I did not—"

"No. You ran to the man who took you. A neat arc," Andrei says flatly.

"What do you want from me?" I ask, my voice lifting without meaning to. "To be a saint? To step away from each of you to protect your pride?"

"I want you to choose," Elias says. His voice is low, stripped of heat. When I meet his eyes, I understand. He is the most wounded. Not by Shades. By me.

Only our breaths fill the space, and the ruins of a moment that could have been beautiful press down.

Villin steps back, composed, jaw tight. His gaze finds me. “Go upstairs,” he says. His hands stay at his sides. “You need rest.”

The words drop like a verdict.

I do not move.

My breath thins. My chest tightens, not with shame, but with the weight of everything that has pressed in for weeks. I look at each of them in turn, and the shell I have built cracks.

“No,” I say, simple and unyielding. My voice carries the weight of refusal.

Villin freezes. “I told you to go upstairs.”

“And I said no.”

My voice trembles, but something deep in me refuses to fold. I step closer, not hiding, not shrinking. I am done running.

“I will not climb a staircase like a scolded child,” I say, letting the words land like stones. “I will not stay silent so you can sit with wounded pride because I felt something.”

Andrei’s jaw tightens. Elias looks away, eyes shadowed with something heavier than anger. Amias does not move, but his gaze smolders, a silent warning.

“You want a choice,” I continue, hands falling to my sides. “You want me to name what I am, what I feel, what I will do. You hold ritual and titles over me. You stare as if every decision I make is a test. I did not promise exclusivity to any of you.”

“Then what did you promise?” Elias asks, voice low, almost fragile. There is no heat in it, only the sharp ache of honesty.

I lower my head. I could lie. I choose the truth. “I gave you something I have never given anyone,” I say. “But I never told you that you were the only one. I did not tell any of you.”

My hands shake, betraying me. “Maybe I should not feel for more than one of you. I do. I will not apologize for it.”

The room holds its breath. The fire ticks in the grate, indifferent, as if it has its own judgment.

“You want to break me into pieces and keep the ones that suit you,” I say, voice sharper now, not from anger but from the bare truth of it. “I am not just the girl who trembled when she was taken. I am not just an heir. I am not only the woman who kissed Elias, or drowned in Andrei’s eyes, or burned beside Amias, or fell into your arms, Villin.”

I let my gaze sweep over each of them.

“I am all of those things,” I say. “Maybe more. I will not choose. Maybe I will never choose. If you can’t live with that, tell me now.”

Andrei closes his eyes, jaw tight. Elias starts to speak and stops. Amias bites his lower lip once and looks away, quiet as a shadow.

Villin steps closer, and for a moment, my pulse spikes, expecting reprimand, command, the weight of a hand putting me back in a box.

It does not come.

“You are right,” he says, voice low, edged with something I do not want to name. “We have no guarantees. Not that I am your Echo. Not that Elias is. Not that Andrei or Amias are. The Resonance does not promise what the heart demands. Maybe we want you less for the claim than for the idea of one.”

He drags a hand through his hair, leaving it disordered, a storm barely held back. His jaw tightens, as if each breath is a decision he does not want to make. Heat presses the air between us, heavy with restraint.

“If you choose not to choose, then each of us has to decide whether we can live inside that truth.” His eyes flick to Andrei, then Elias, then Amias,

everyone weighing a breaking point.

I meet him without flinching. “Exactly.” The word cuts the room sharper than any blade, and a silence follows that tastes of jealousy and fire.

Andrei’s hands clench, knuckles white. Elias looks down, jaw set, the ghost of his fear still lingering. Amias exhales slowly, the storm behind his restraint showing in the smallest crack. Villin does not move, but the weight of him fills the space, a tether wound around all of us.

The quiet is not forgiveness. It’s not acceptance. It’s something older, heavier, a recognition that nothing about us fits into neat lines or safe decisions.

It’s the first move of something raw and honest. A reckoning that has been waiting, patient and brutal, for all of us to arrive.

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## VILLIN

Morning finds me with an empty coffee mug clamped in my left hand and a thought that refuses to vanish, no matter how many times I try to swallow it.

How did I let this happen?

How did she slip past every wall I built?

The kitchen holds its silence like a verdict. Only the old clock ticks in rhythm with my pulse. Light cuts through the arched windows at hard angles, sharp enough to carve shadows into the wood. This house was made to stay cold, walls laid to hold distance. And yet since she arrived, the air has bent. So have I.

My fingers grind against the porcelain, the handle creaking under the pressure I refuse to let out anywhere else. If I let go, I might break something that matters. If I move, I might break myself. So I stay still.

I ask myself why I obsess over her, why I love her, and I can't pin it to a single moment. Was it when she first looked at me without fear? When her palm pressed against Elias’s chest and dragged him back from the void? Or

earlier still, when she defied me with fire in her eyes? The answers do not come separately; they pile up, one on top of another, until I can barely breathe.

The coffee hisses, steady and familiar. I pour hers first into the plain black mug I keep for her. She likes it darker, with a dash of cinnamon. She has no idea I do this every morning. I tell myself it's respect, a ritual of discipline, but the truth runs closer to obsession than I care to admit.

I hear her steps before I see her, long and measured, quickening at the last stair as if it steals her breath.

She comes down dressed in uniform. The fitted black top traces the line of her shoulders and breasts, the cargo pants sit on her hips with a quiet authority that looks like a crown. She moves with a warrior's grace, quick and lethal, and though her face is paler today, it does nothing to dim the fire in her eyes. Deep brown and haunted, they catch the light and my chest knots.

She sits without a word, lifts the mug, and takes a slow sip. She does not look at me.

"It's good," she says.

Two words, then silence, as if yesterday never happened, as if my heart hadn't tried to tear out of me while I carried her limp body, as if my chest hadn't burned when she bent death to her will and then collapsed against me.

"Celeste, we need to talk."

Her eyes finally meet mine. The look freezes me in place just as much as it cuts.

"No, Villin. There's nothing to say."

I go still. My fingers tighten around the mug until the porcelain nearly cracks. My shoulders lock. My jaw aches from holding back.

“After everything?”

“Because of everything,” she murmurs. “It doesn’t make sense. There’s no room for it. I don’t want to hear anything. Not now.”

I force my body into stillness, though every instinct strains against it. I stare into my own mug as if the surface might give me answers to the ruin taking root inside me.

She drinks in silence. On the surface, she looks composed, but her hands tremble just enough to betray her. Anger, fear, survival’s mask, it could be any of those. I know better. Beneath every denial, she feels the pull. I feel it too. This is only the beginning.

She stands, smooths the hem of her top, gathers her hair back with a single sweep, and leaves the room without a backward glance. The door closes, and I am left with the scent of coffee, the tick of the clock, and questions that grow barbs.

I rinse the mugs and set them into the washer, letting habit guide my hands while my thoughts splinter in a dozen directions. It feels as if something steady has been torn out of me by the roots, leaving a hollow that refuses to close.

The phone buzzes against the counter. A Council alert lights the screen: emergency session in thirty minutes, Resonance Hall, attendance required.

I shake my head at the timing. Too early, and far too convenient.

I dress for war, not ceremony. The black suit slides over my skin like armor, Italian wool that costs more than most people’s cars but feels cold as a coffin lining. Each piece is deliberate: white shirt with a collar so crisp it could cut, top button left undone because real power does not need to

strangle itself for show. I work the leather of my belt through its buckle with the same precision I once used to load ammunition. The mirror throws back a stranger's face. Or maybe the man I was always meant to become. My eyes, usually the pale silver my mother called "winter sky," have sharpened to something that could draw blood. The scruff I have let grow for three days is not carelessness. It's a declaration. Let them see their golden boy has tarnished. The Council wanted an heir. They are getting a reckoning instead.

I turn from the mirror and fold through the air, reality bending around me like heated glass. The cold hits me like a physical blow the moment I materialize in the anteroom outside Resonance Hall. It's not a natural cold but something alive, hungry, biting through expensive wool. The air tastes of scorched stone and bitter incense, thick enough to coat my throat. Beneath my feet, the floor pulses with a low thrumming that vibrates through my bones. The ley lines converge here, deep under Axis Spire, turning this place into a wound in the world. This is where Alaska bleeds, where the veil between worlds hangs in tatters.

Two gargoyles flank the doors, fresh from the Academy, their stone wings twitching with the stiff eagerness of youth. They offer respectful nods, but I catch the wariness in their carved features, the way they track my movement. *Smart.* I step between them, and the doors boom shut behind me with the finality of a tomb sealing.

The Resonance Hall does not just welcome me. It devours me, like stepping into the lair of some ancient beast. This chamber was never meant to be a simple meeting room. Every surface was crafted to test, to judge, to strip away pretense until only truth remains bleeding on the floor. The walls breathe with their own pulse, a rhythm that matches no human heart but

something far older, something that feeds on the power channeled through this cursed place.

An obsidian table commands the center like a black altar, its surface so polished it reflects not light but secrets. The moment I cross the threshold, faces snap toward me with predatory precision. Their stares slice through the air, a dozen blades already drawn and thirsting for the first sign of weakness.

Robert White offers the ghost of a nod, a gesture so slight it might have been imagined. But in this room, even breath carries meaning. Kith El’Mara lounges in his chair like decay made elegant, draped in gold silk embroidered with star patterns from empires that crumbled before his grandfather drew breath. Perfume and powder cannot disguise the stench of desperation clinging to him. His house was always the weakest in Elmaris' northeast, a fact he tries to bury under layers of faded grandeur. If Elmaris had not been sealed, maybe his bloodline would have meant something more than antique silk wrapped around a spine made of spite.

Willson’s chair sits empty, a monument to failure. He is in Europe for the foreseeable future. Let it gather dust. Some seats are better left vacant.

I sink into my designated chair with the fluid control of a predator settling onto its haunches. Every movement deliberate, every breath calculated. On the surface, I offer them marble stillness, the kind of calm that comes before the storm. Underneath, my body coils tight as piano wire, every nerve screaming readiness for the moment someone makes their move.

And then I raise my eyes to the opposite side of the table.

What waits there is not a chair. It is an accusation carved in mahogany and brass.

William Nightmoor occupies that throne like a cancer that has learned to wear a uniform. The butcher who buried my father in unmarked earth. The architect who cracked Elmaris open like an egg, then sealed the wound with innocent blood, painting genocide as military necessity. His black dress uniform still bears every star and ribbon he stole through slaughter. Age has hollowed his cheeks and carved trenches around his eyes, but the hunger in him burns just as bright. It presses outward like ice crawling across glass, cold and claiming, choking the warmth from every corner of the room.

“Lord Villin,” Nightmoor says, his tone low, clipped, like a blade sliding across stone. “We appreciate your presence, even at the last minute.”

I lean in my seat. Every movement is deliberate. My shoulders stay squared, my jaw locked. I will not give him a scrap of deference he has not earned. “I do not miss official calls.”

He does not flinch. “I have been occupied with rebels in Europe. The situation escalated. I regret I could not address my daughter’s case in person, yet I am told it is handled.”

“It is,” I reply, voice even, leaving the thread there.

“Congratulations. How did you locate her if she kept her gifts leashed? Without a trail, I did not expect anyone to find her soon.”

I hold his gaze. My grip tightens on the arms of the chair, muscles coiling beneath the black fabric of my suit, the only motion allowed by self-restraint. “A field team flagged a magical signature of unusual magnitude, closer to a seismic spike than a trace. Celeste’s imprint cut across every dampening net, and our tracker followed the thread to New York. We recovered your daughter.”

He tilts his head, slow, calculated. “Fortunate. You saved my child, and perhaps the family’s name.”

Sarcasm rides the edge of the words, but there is also a warning, a quiet promise that he remembers everything.

“I did not do it for you.” My tone is flat, but my body hums with tension, the pull of control barely held in. My fists loosen just enough to let the chair support me without cracking under the pressure.

Robert White clears it with steady authority. “Leave the past in the past. The fissure at the Elmaris portal has widened. Shade incursions are growing aggressive. Our window narrows.”

Nightmoor inclines slightly, as if hearing it for the first time. “That is why REAPER exists, to neutralize and maintain order.”

I swallow against the tightness in my throat and watch him, every fiber coiled. My body is still, but the tension thrums in my arms, my jaw, my chest, a contained storm. Every second I remain here is a battle not to unleash what I have carried into this room.

Still, the words hit like fire along a nerve. “Neutralize. The REAPER teams were built to train and contain, not to die on your watch. My brother barely made it through the infirmary yesterday, one breath from the veil. Andrei almost lost his soul. How many more before you admit your grip has slipped?”

Kith smooths his gilded sleeve with the kind of calm that feels like a challenge, a predator masking fangs. “The balance was always fragile. It is our charge to hold it.”

“The balance broke the day William Nightmoor and Queen Evanthe sealed the portal,” I say, my hands clutching the arms of the chair until the wood groans under the pressure. My jaw clenches tight, my shoulders locked, a coiled weight holding me in place. Every muscle strains to keep

me from rising, from throwing myself across the table and shaking the truth into the men around me.

White's voice stays even. "If the seal thins, it's not pride at stake. It's survival. Unstable readings have been reported near the South Garden more than once."

"Temporal interference," Kith says, bored enough to make it sound like a shrug. "The portal is old."

"It's not only age," I growl, leaning forward despite the tension coiling in my gut. "If that fissure gives, we will not get a neat little fight. We get Elmaris at its hungriest. Those left on the far side are not patient. They are starving. They are vicious. They will take everything we hold dear and tear it to shreds."

"That is precisely why the gate was shut," Nightmoor says, voice cold as obsidian, eyes sharper than a guillotine's edge. "To keep horrors from crossing. Or have you forgotten what waited behind that wall?"

"I have not. You, however, have forgotten why you turned the key. Not duty, envy. You could not rule Elmaris; only the queen could. Evanthe. Celeste's mother. You closed a world because you could not control her." I lean forward, the chair groaning beneath me as my weight presses into it, my hands gripping the arms until my knuckles blanch. "Tell me how Evanthe died during a routine capture. Explain how a vampire with narrow, specific weaknesses fell to a common werewolf."

The chamber goes dead quiet. Every head turns toward me, the faint hum of the ley lines underfoot vibrating through the stone. Robert White gives me the smallest nod, a gesture loaded with acknowledgment. Kith, finally, actually looks at me, all the hauteur stripped away.

Nightmoor rises, slow, deliberate, the weight of the man filling the room. “Watch yourself,” he warns, the steel in his tone barely veiled.

“You should be the one afraid,” I say, letting the words ride out over the silence. My voice does not waver, though every muscle in my body strains against the need to slam a fist, to shatter the control I force into these bones. “Not of me, but of what comes out when truth finds its voice.”

A flicker of hesitation crosses his face, quick and sharp, like a shadow passing over stone. “And who will give it one?” he asks, voice tight, “You?”

My lips curve into a smile that does not reach my eyes. “The fissure will do the talking.”

The silence that follows is absolute. It presses down on the room like a held breath, thick enough to choke on. My knuckles have gone white against the chair arms, jaw locked so tight my molars ache. The air itself feels ready to ignite, heavy with the weight of words unspoken and violence held in check. Every nerve in my body hums like a live wire, and I can taste the metallic tang of adrenaline on my tongue.

He stares at me the way a man stares at a wall he wants to knock down. The session dissolves around us, tension so thick it sticks to my bones and weighs down my shoulders as I rise. I do not regret my words. I do, however, understand that I have declared a kind of war.

Cold cuts through corridors, sharp against my skin. There is no time to savor the reckoning.

Amias.

I fold into his classroom, doors slamming open. Students startle as one body, then another reacts. Amias looks up from the lectern, irritation

flashing across his face before he masks it. He knows I did not come to attend a lecture.

“Class is over,” I say, voice calm, deliberate. “You may leave.”

A murmur ripples through the room. No one moves. Amias’s jaw tightens. “Villin, this is not the time.”

“Do not test me,” I reply. “Out.”

The command cuts like a blade. Chairs scrape, bags lift, bodies funnel toward the door. But one student lingers at the back.

“Some people have started aiming high,” Cassandra says, voice carrying, sharp, and mocking. “From fugitive to princess to the REAPER commander’s bed. What is next, the Council? Careful, princess. Too many important eyes can end in an execution.”

Celeste stands, fury burning in her dark eyes. I do not hesitate.

“Enough,” I say, closing my hand. “Cassandra.” The healers may have purged the lingering corruption, she looks whole and twice as venomous.

“What? I only said what everyone thinks. You ignored a viable match for years, and the moment Elmaris’s little heir arrives, you move her into your house. My parents approved the match on power and influence. You skipped our dinners, ignored our invitations. We could have been the next power couple, and you—”

She steps closer with each accusation, drunk on her family’s ambition and her own delusions. I do not give her another second. My fingers flex, and a portal ignites at her feet. Light blooms, searing, and the floor swallows her. She is gone before the air even settles.

Amias exhales, half scandalized, half amused. “You sent her to the cells?”

“She will not speak that way about a Council member, and certainly not about Nightmoor’s heir.” I let the final stragglers exit, the scrape of boots

and whispering filling the doorway. Then the door shuts. Finally, silence.

Celeste tenses, her body tightening as the latch clicks. I carefully take her arm. It's not a threat. It's the quiet truth of a claim I no longer pretend to deny. Every fiber of me hums under restraint, the edges of desire and protection coiled, waiting. And she knows it, even if she does not yet name it.

"You stay. We have something to discuss."

Silence settles like smoke, thick and heavy, carrying the memory of coffee steam and the burn of her skin against mine.

The truth lies naked in the room. I want her to know it. I want her to feel it in the hollow of her own chest, as sharp and undeniable as a bowstring pulled to its limit, ready to sing the moment I let go.

My eyes track her, slow and deliberate, measuring her, memorizing, warning myself with every heartbeat that I can stop, I must stop, and yet I cannot hide the draw, the gravity she wields without even knowing.

Everything we have said, everything left unspoken, converges here. And in the quiet, I can feel the tether, taut and real, between her and me.

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## CELESTE

The classroom feels gutted, the slam of the door still reverberating in the bones of the walls. Villin grips the lectern like it's the only thing anchoring him; his knuckles are white, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Amias stands a measured distance away, arms loose, eyes cutting sharp as blades. I am the rope pulled taut between them, fraying strand by strand.

My gaze drops to the empty patch of floor where Cassandra stood. The air still buzzes with her absence. I cannot help wondering how everything spun so violently off track.

"Why did you do that?" I ask Villin. My voice trembles more than I want. "What was that reaction?"

He drags a hand through his hair, fighting for composure an inch at a time. "I do not tolerate disrespect toward you. Not from students, not from Councilors, not from anyone."

Amias exhales slowly, as if biting back an argument. "Do not tell me that is all there is to it. You lost it, Villin. You raised your voice to the whole

class and flung a student out of the room like she was nothing. Something happened at the Council, did it not?”

My pulse spikes so hard my vision flickers.

“You are worthless as a Seer if you didn't see this coming,” Villin snaps, voice rawer than I have ever heard it.

“I would love to watch you stand upright under a crush of visions while the Goddess reroutes your every thought,” Amias fires back. “I am not untouchable. I am a Seer, not a god.”

Villin's voice drops lower, rougher, shaking with heat he cannot cage. “William was there. In the flesh. He still holds half the Council by the throat. He is more dangerous than ever. He pushed us, Amias, and he will push her.”

The words hit like a punch. “What did you say?” I rasp.

He looks at me, eyes dark with things he should not say. Silence hangs for half a breath too long, and then his restraint snaps. “Your father. He is here, at Axis Spire. He was in the Council chamber.”

The floor tilts out from under me. My lungs seize. I reach blindly for the edge of a desk, fingers clawing at wood just to keep myself upright.

“No. He was not supposed to… no one said…”

Heat floods my face and drains just as fast, leaving me hollow. Pressure locks tight around my ribs. The room darkens at the edges.

Villin shifts one step forward, every line of him straining to intervene, then stops. Palms flex open, then fist again. His restraint is agony to watch. It rides his shoulders and quivers in the wood beneath his grip. He looks like a man chained to a stone while fire climbs his body.

Amias’s hand lands light and steady on my shoulder. “Celeste. Breathe. Look at me. In and out.”

I try, but the command slides off. All I see is William’s face: glacial calm, cruelty sharp as glass. The hunter who turned my first night as a woman into a lifetime of flight. The hand that broke my mother and called it protection.

My body folds into a chair. I bury my face in my palms. Tears come hot and soundless, then break loose and spill faster than I can swipe them away.

“I can’t,” I choke. “I can’t see him. I can’t.”

Villin’s restraint shreds another inch. His chest rises too hard, too fast, as if every sob tears something out of him, too. He does not move toward me, but he shakes with the need.

“You don't have to,” he says, and his voice startles me. “Not right now. But we need the truth. Tonight. Why did you run? What drove you out that night?”

I drag my sleeve across my face. My hands still shake. “I don't trust you. Not completely. You were not there.”

“Then let us in,” Amias says, calm and resolute. “Make a pact with us. No one else will hear it. Only the three of us. I swear it.”

I look between them. Amias’s eyes are steady and relentless. Villin’s hold a fire he cannot name. His focus presses against my skin. He will not let me run.

Silence draws tight, heavy as a noose. Once I speak it aloud, nothing will be the same. “All right.” My voice comes thin and raw. “I swear. If either of you breaks this—”

“We will not,” Amias says. Villin inclines his head, grave and binding.

We step close until the air thickens. Amias traces a circle in the air with one finger, slow and precise. Power stirs in its wake. It rises like heat from

stone after frost, faint at first, then heavy enough to bend the air. It winds around us like a rope, promise and chain at once.

My heart hammers. I close my eyes and let the current take me. Our palms meet, mine caught between theirs. Gold light unfurls at our feet and climbs, a narrow band that cinches until I feel it in the marrow of my bones. The pact seals.

Something catches inside me, a pull I cannot break. Three hearts tied to one truth.

Amias leans close, breath warm at my ear. “If you allow it, I want to see. Not your life, only that night. The moment you ran. Nothing more. I will not harm you.”

I bite my lip until I taste blood, then nod. “Only that.”

He sets his hands lightly on my temples. Magic whispers across my skin, cool and deliberate, the touch of someone who knows he is treading dangerous ground. The floor falls away. Memory yawns open like a door I thought I had bricked shut.

A voice rises from the dark. Not mine.

*“Let it be clear. The portal was not closed out of fear. Nor out of weakness. It was my choice. The only logical one. The war, though real, was mostly a façade.”*

*Papers rustle. A chair scrapes. His tone hardens.*

*“I could not leave Elmaris in the hands of a woman ruled by dreams and illusions. Their queen was weak. Her heart, a breach. My Axis brothers were too consumed with honor to see victory. I was the first touched by Saeris. I felt the bond. The rest only felt regret.”*

*A short, cutting laugh.*

*“And now… Celeste. The same spark. But sharper. More dangerous. Curiosity will destroy her. If she learns the truth, everything falls. The ritual must be done before she reaches twenty-five. Quietly. Without a trace. Let her death look like an accident. It will be cleaner that way.”*

I am not ready to see his face again, even here, even in memory. But the words don’t ask permission. They carve themselves into me, searing lines I will carry long after the echo fades.

Amias jerks back as if burned, stumbling and panting. Villin has gone white. His jaw clenches so hard a muscle jumps in his temple. He drags both hands down his face, barely holding it together.

They heard. They saw. The secret that has hunted me for years.

"Goddess." Amias's voice comes out hollow, barely a whisper. "That is your father."

"Yes." The word scrapes out of my raw throat. "And he is here."

What follows isn't really silence at all. It's something heavier, a pressure that settles over us like dust, thick and suffocating. The truth hangs in the air between us, impossible to ignore or soften. Everything feels off-balance now, like the memory itself has poisoned the air around us.

I lean back against the wall, not sure how long I sit there with my heart hammering in my chest. Amias sinks to the floor and pulls his knees up, staring at nothing, still processing what he just saw. Villin paces like a caged animal, wound tight as a spring.

When he finally stops, his words come out like bullets. "We need to do something. We can't just let this slide."

I look up at him. His face is stone cold, but his eyes give him away. There is fire behind them, raw and dangerous. He felt every word. So did Amias, who still has not found his voice.

“If the Awakening Ritual is meant to kill me before twenty-five,” I keep my voice low, “then the clock is already running out.”

“And our list of allies is shorter than a short deck,” Amias mutters, raking both hands through his hair. “Time and trust are working against us.”

Villin steps in front of me and stops dead in his tracks. “I had a gut feeling.” His hands clench at his sides. “I was almost sure of it. From here on, we keep our mouths shut. No one else hears what we saw. Not even my brothers. The Council is a snake pit, and Nightmoor has his fingers in too many pies. We need a game plan.”

My mouth goes dry. “What kind of plan?”

His stare does not waver. “We dig. We turn over every rock that keeps the Council in power. We strip the portal’s history to the bone. We take the Resonance and the Awakening apart piece by piece until we find a way to kill it, or twist it until it snaps.”

The truth lands heavily. “If my father catches wind of this, he will not hesitate. He will come for me. For all of us. He will cut me loose for good.”

Villin’s jaw sets. “Let him come.”

Amias gets to his feet, steadier than he has any right to be with everything weighing on him. “Muscle will not be enough. We have to stay three steps ahead and beat them at their own game. I will hit the Restricted Archives. Villin, take the Council records. Celeste,” he says, locking eyes with me, “watch your six. Hold your ground. Do not let him under your skin.”

I look back and forth between them. One's all fire and steel, the other's got the vision and backbone to see things through. Despite all the bad blood and competition that's been eating at us, despite all the stuff we're still not saying out loud, here we are on the same team. Three of us are digging in our heels against the same storm.

I take a deep breath and square my shoulders. "All right, let's do this."

Something clicks into place as I hear myself say it. I'm not going to be anybody's lamb to the slaughter. I'm not going to bite the bullet for some ritual or for a man who's more loyal to his throne than his own flesh and blood. I'll become whatever I have to, even if it means burning bridges with my own blood.

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## CELESTE

The table is set like something out of a painting. Silver catches the warm glow of the chandelier and throws it back in shards across Villin’s dining room. Rosemary mingles with a hint of garlic, drifting through the air like a promise I want to believe. Still, none of it touches the tension. It hovers between the three of us like an invisible fourth place setting.

Amias sits to my left, spine straight, fingers wrapped around his fork like a lifeline. Villin occupies the far end, calm on the surface, one eye on us and the other on a calculation I cannot read, his expression locked somewhere between irritation and the cold focus of a man measuring odds.

The silence stretches and thickens. Every scrape of steel against porcelain rings too sharply, like the world itself is holding its breath. I run my fingers through my hair and force my gaze to my plate, but my pulse is a drum I cannot quiet.

“How long are we going to keep acting like this is no big deal?” I keep my voice down, staring at my plate instead of looking at them.

Villin sets his fork down with a quiet click. He speaks before Amias can get a word out. “Playing it cool is just putting on a show. Sometimes the act works better than letting people see what’s really going on.”

Amias cocks his head, green eyes lighting like he’s ready for a fight. “So that’s your story now?”

“It’s not an excuse. It’s staying alive,” Villin says. “We keep up the act if we want to make it until the Council shows its hand. And that starts with getting through this dinner.”

“You’re always worried about appearances and staying in control,” Amias shoots back. “What happens when you can’t call the shots anymore?”

The question hangs in the air like a loaded gun. I steal a glance at Villin for any sign of the person under all that ice-cold control. But his jaw clenches tight, his shoulders don't budge, and the dangerous look in his eyes reminds me exactly why we can't screw this up.

Old rivalry hums under the table. This has never been just about me. Power, position, pride—everything presses against the seams, ready to snap.

“Did you both forget I’m sitting here?” My eyes drift to the linen. “I’m not a piece on your board.”

Villin closes his eyes and takes a slow breath. “No, but you’re the center the board spins around.”

“And if I refuse to play?”

“Then all of us lose,” Amias answers.

I lift my gaze to him. Regret lingers there, a worn kind of honesty pressing against the tension in the room.

“What do we do now? Where does this go?”

Villin rises and moves down the length of the table, each step measured, presence cutting through the air like a sharpened blade. “We brace the line. We prepare for anything. Tomorrow we start digging deeper. This isn’t just about the ritual. Someone else has a stake in this. We figure out who benefits from your death.”

The way he says my name carries more weight than it should. There’s something protective in his voice that settles around me, impossible to ignore.

His phone buzzes on the table. He glances at the screen, breathes out slowly, and straightens. “I have to leave. Emergency session. The Council’s calling.”

He moves with the easy confidence of someone used to being in charge, but I can tell he’s still on edge underneath. His eyes stay on me longer than they need to. “You’ll be safe while I’m gone.”

The door closes, and the room feels larger, cooler. The fire answers with a low flicker, the plates serving as mute witnesses. Amias remains still, sets his fork down, folds his hands, then stares past the table as if he can see through the walls.

“You shouldn’t be alone with me,” he says at last, voice barely louder than the fire.

“Why not?” His eyes find me with a pull I can’t resist.

“Because I’m carrying more than I’ve admitted. And because I don’t know if I can keep my hands to myself.”

My heart skips a beat. “Keep your hands from what, Amias?”

He doesn’t answer. The silence speaks for him, thick and electric, like the air before lightning strikes.

“What did you see in your visions?”

He stands, pacing a quiet circle. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

He stops, turns, and locks his eyes on mine, steady and searching. “I saw you. In every ending and every beginning, you remain. You are the knot where every thread pulls tight. It terrifies me. It draws me anyway.”

I stand, the table no longer a barrier between us, only empty air that tastes like anticipation.“Do you see a threat,” I ask, “or a woman?”

He steps closer, hand lifting as if he touches me first in thought, then in flesh.“Both.”

I catch his wrist and guide his palm to my cheek. “Then don’t run from either.”

We hold each other’s eyes, the room collapsing to a smaller world. He leans in, softer than I expected, as if careful not to disturb the fragile shape of this moment.

“There’s something you have to hear.” My voice steadies, stopping him just shy of my mouth. “This is not a choice. I’m not choosing you. I’m not choosing anyone. Not now, maybe not ever. I need to know I can trust you anyway. That you’ll stand with me, no matter what comes.”

He blinks, then his mouth breaks into a smile, fragile and real. “I understand. I’ll never rush you. I’m here to protect you, whatever you decide.”

He kisses me.

It is not possessive, not careless. It tastes of hunger held back too long, of questions finally pulled into the open, of regret aching for forgiveness, and need that refuses silence. His arms fold around me with reverence, almost disbelief. The world shrinks to the heat of his mouth, to the way my body answers as if it had been waiting for this exact shape.

He draws me closer, sure and careful, as if we were always meant to fit this way. A tremor runs through him when my hands slide up his neck. I thread my fingers into his hair and pull him deeper. The kiss darkens, consuming us.

His lips move like both a plea and a promise.

And yet, even as my body answers, a part of me holds back, the questions that have haunted me for months gnawing at my thoughts. Trust. Control. Safety. Every instinct screams caution. But there is also this, a gravity I cannot fight, the certainty that if I don't let him in now, I might never have the chance to feel this clarity, this connection, this reckoning. The way his mouth and hands map me, careful and deliberate, tells me I can let go, at least for this moment.

I break the surface for air. "Come to my room."

For a split second, he looks stunned, like he can't quite believe what I've said. Then his jaw sets, and I see the exact moment he makes his decision. "Yes."

I almost hesitate before opening the door. My pulse races, not just from desire, but from the fragile hope that letting him close will not undo me. I am choosing this, not surrendering, and that thought steels me.

We barely clear the threshold before his hands return to me. They are not greedy; they worship. His mouth finds mine again, slower this time, guiding me back until the bed catches behind my knees. And for the first time in a long while, I feel the friction of fear and need fuse into something I can hold onto, something I can trust, if only for the night.

He pulls back just enough to look at me. His pupils are wide, and his breath comes in shallow pulls, like he's measuring whether he's allowed to stay. I can feel the weight of every choice pressing between us, the memory

of last night, the longing that refuses to be quiet. My heart drums in my ears. I want him, and I need him to understand that this isn’t reckless—I’m inviting him because I trust him in a way that terrifies me.

“Tell me what you want,” he says, voice low, ragged at the edges.

"You," I breathe against his mouth. "Don't stop."

He nods like it’s a vow he’ll keep, a line drawn in the air, and lowers me onto the mattress.

I lie back, eyes tracing the curve of his shoulders as he climbs over me. His weight presses down, as if afraid one wrong move might shatter everything between us. And yet, hunger coils sharp beneath the surface, tightening something deep inside me. His palm slides across my waist and hesitates at the hem of my shirt, and I feel a thrill run like fire through my veins.

“Can I?” he asks, voice caught between need and reverence.

I nod without hesitation. Every instinct in me says yes.

He lifts the shirt slowly, letting it fall over my head. His gaze roams my bare chest, and I see his breath hitch. His fingers, trembling just a little, trace the line of my collarbone and the soft curve between my breasts.

“You are beautiful,” he murmurs, and it lands with a weight that makes my chest ache.

His lips follow the path of his hand, warm and deliberate. He closes his mouth around my nipple, the first pull gentle, a test. His tongue moves in patient circles, learning, memorizing. I arch into him without thinking, the sound that slips out of me helpless and raw.

“Amias,” I gasp, my voice breaking into the quiet room.

He shudders, his hand moving down across my stomach, finding the waistband of my pants.

“Can I touch you?” he asks again, this time like he’s asking permission to enter my body and my trust all at once.

“Yes,” I whisper, thin and urgent, every part of me burning for him.

He moves slowly, achingly slow, as if he’s trying to savor and memorize every second. His fingers slip inside me, finding the slick heat, teasing and coaxing. “You are so wet,” he breathes, low and almost in awe. “Goddess, Celeste.”

He takes me apart one precise motion at a time, learning my body like a map he’s never dared to touch before. His eyes never leave mine, drinking in every response, every shiver, every hitched breath. I grip the sheets until my knuckles ache, hips arching into his hand, and he watches as if this is exactly what he came for.

“Let go,” he murmurs against my throat.

I do, and the orgasm crashes through me in waves that tear and rebuild me in seconds. My legs shake, my body bows, and his name dissolves into a raw cry. He doesn’t pull back. He keeps working, drawing out every tremor until I am spent, collapsed into the mattress, breathless and trembling.

When he finally eases his hand away, it's as if I might break if he touches me again. The reverence in him feels almost sanctified.

He lies down beside me, flushed, still fully clothed. My eyes drop, and I see the evidence of his restraint. He doesn’t reach for himself. Not yet.

“You didn’t—” I start.

“I didn’t do this for me,” he says softly. “I wanted to see you fall apart.”

And in that moment, I understand. I invited him because I needed this—the release, the surrender, the intimacy without fear. Because even when the world was closing in, even when everything else demanded caution, I could trust him to see me fully and not flinch.

I turn toward him, my heart hammering for no good reason. He looks away, a flash of shyness crossing his face like he’s caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

I lift a hand, my fingertips brushing his cheek. “You didn’t just see me,” I whisper. “You held me together.”

His smile is small, real, and it almost knocks the wind out of me more than his hands ever could.

We lie quietly, breathing in the same rhythm. His arm drapes over me, solid and protective, while the other drifts across my bare shoulder, tracing idle shapes. Feather-light. Not hesitant, not testing the waters. Just devotion.

The fog in my head softens. I feel safe. The world shrinks to this room, this bed, this man who can pull me apart and put me back together without forcing anything.

I tilt my face toward him and catch his gaze. Color rises in his cheeks.

“Sorry,” he murmurs. “You’re hard not to look at.”

“Even now?”

“Especially now.”

His fingers drift down my arm, raising goosebumps. “You’re beautiful when you fall apart,” he says. “Even better when you go quiet afterward. Soft.”

“I’m not usually soft,” I admit.

“I know,” he whispers. “That’s exactly why it matters.”

I freeze. He’s found a part of me no one else has dared to touch. Not the fighter, not the strategist, not the mask I wear when showing emotion would cost too much.

He tugs the blanket up around us and props the pillow under my head like it’s second nature. “You should rest.”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

The silence stretches between us, heavy with everything unsaid.

"Can I hold you?" I don't trust my voice, so I just move closer, letting my body answer for me.

He wraps around me, our bodies molding together without a single gap. I press my face to his neck, inhaling the unmistakable scent that is Amias. His hands stay planted on my back.

“Why are you this gentle?” I whisper.

He tips my chin until our eyes lock. “Because I know what it feels like to be touched like you don’t exist. You are real. Every single inch of you.”

My throat tightens. I can’t speak, so I kiss him—first along the sharp line of his jaw, then the corner of his mouth.

He smiles like I handed him a winning hand no one else ever knew existed.

“Stay with me tonight,” I murmur.

“Always.”

I drift off in his arms, no thoughts of running, no shadows chasing me. Just the steady beat of him, holding me in place, and the quiet knowledge that for once, I am right where I’m supposed to be.

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## CELESTE

I wake slowly, dawn spilling thin and pale through the curtains. Warmth steadies me before I even open my eyes, a broad chest pressed to my back, a hand threading through my hair with the kind of care that quiets even the noisiest thoughts. Amias lies on his side, watching me like he has been standing guard all night. My pulse is steady. My breath falls into his without effort. Maybe it's the heat of him, or maybe it’s something new, something I have been afraid to name, taking root between us.

A knock shatters the quiet. A firm voice follows, clipped and sure.

“Celeste. It is time.”

My heart lurches. I know that voice before my feet touch the floor. Pulling the blanket to my chest, I rise and open the door.

Villin fills the frame, winter in his eyes, mouth drawn tight. Behind me, Amias pushes up on one elbow, surprise flashing across his face, then folding into something quieter.

Villin looks at me like anger and jealousy have been forced to share a seat with hurt. A crossroads, the kind of moment that can rearrange a life with a

single step.

I feel torn clean down the middle. Amias is behind me, warm and unguarded, the kind of soft you want to shield from the world. He watches with steady green eyes, worry flickering there, fear that what just began between us is already slipping away. Villin stands in the threshold like a verdict, all sharp lines and hard control, the kind of presence that thins the air just by existing.

I lift my chin and meet his stare head-on. “I was clear. I am not choosing between you. You do not get to tell me what to do.”

He leans in a fraction, enough to shift the room’s gravity. “I am not here to order you around, Celeste. I am telling you the truth. Between us, it never stays buried for long.”

“You are not my keeper. You do not get to define who I am or what I should feel.”

Amias pushes higher on the pillows, shoulders taut. His gaze never leaves Villin, and the wire strung between them feels sharp enough to cut. When he glances back at me, there is a softness in his eyes that reads like a promise. Whatever comes, he will stand.

Villin’s jaw locks. For a single beat, something raw flickers through the mask. It looks like fear, the kind that only surfaces when you finally have something to lose. “Then I wait,” he says quietly. He shuts the door and leaves.

Amias watches me with a patience that doesn't press, the kind of gaze that steadies more than it unsettles. There is quiet awe in it, enough to stop my hands from trembling. “Celeste.” My name falls from his lips like a promise more than a sound. “I know none of this is simple. I know you don’t want to

choose now, and maybe you never will. I need you to understand I am here either way. That is not a chain around your neck. It’s just the plain truth.”

His hand lifts toward me, tentative at first, then certain when his palm finds my cheek. Heat spreads through me at the touch, the rest of the world dropping away like background noise. “You do not have to be afraid to feel,” he says, voice low against the space between us. “You do not have to disappear just to make it through.”

I hold his eyes and let the mask slip for a single breath. “Amias,” the word stumbles out, thin and fragile, “this is not a decision. Not for you, not for anyone. But I am grateful, for last night and for right now.”

A smile finally breaks across his face, the first since dawn, and it lights something inside me I thought was ash. “For now, it’s enough. Whenever you need me, I will be there.”

At the door, he pauses, glancing back once, a look like a vow carved in stone. “Take care of yourself, Celeste.”

When the door closes behind him, the quiet does not ring empty. It settles heavy and alive, as if built to hold me rather than swallow me. I sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for my pulse to find its uneven rhythm again. Somehow, even broken, it still makes sense.

His words echo. I don’t have to choose. I don’t have to vanish. Life is not that neat. Choosing feels like a maze with no straight exit. Villin is darkness and armor, a shield that never bends. Elias is tenderness, the kind of fighter who keeps choosing me back. Amias is steady ground, safety that does not suffocate. How do you pick when each man is a piece of the answer and every piece matters?

What I know for certain is that I will not carve myself down to fit someone else’s story. Not theirs, not the Council’s, not my father’s. I will

not let the weight of choice split me apart to make the world more comfortable. I don’t want to hurt any of them, but in this life, love always shows up carrying a price.

I close my eyes and reach for whatever sliver of peace I can find. Tears slip free, warm against my skin, and I don’t stop them. The road ahead is only opening, rough and unforgiving, but I will walk it anyway.

For me. For them. For everything still worth saving.

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## CELESTE

The classroom empties in a slow trickle, desks scraping, voices fading, until the last sound dies under the Academy's stone halls. Afternoon light filters through the tall windows, pale and hesitant, as if it has lost the courage to reach the floor. My steps echo too loudly. Everything feels colder, quieter, as if the walls themselves are waiting for something I can't name.

Lys is easy to spot. She sits on a stone bench by the stairwell, knees pulled up, her face turned toward me with a smile that tries too hard to hide the worry in her eyes. The effort makes my chest ache.

I lower myself beside her and let the quiet stretch between us before she speaks.

"How are you?" Her voice is gentle, the kind of question that doesn't demand, only offers.

"I'm torn up and tired." My breath leaves me long and slow, carrying more weight than I mean to reveal. "It keeps getting harder to know what I actually feel and what I'm supposed to do."

Her hand finds my shoulder. “I know it’s a lot, Celeste. With all of them circling you, it’s like standing in the middle of a whirlpool that never stops turning.”

“That is exactly what it feels like.” My voice thins with the admission. “Villin, Amias, Elias, Andrei. Each of them pulls something different out of me, and it all blurs together until I can’t tell where I begin. Some days I feel like I’m scattered in pieces. I don’t know how to fit them back together.”

“You are not broken.” Her smile is soft but carries a shadow of sadness. “Your heart is just bigger than the small world they keep trying to squeeze you into.”

Warmth swells in my chest, chased almost immediately by doubt. “But how long can I keep holding it all together? How long before everything I’m balancing just spills out?”

“You don’t have to carry it alone.” Her voice drops, barely above a whisper. “I’m here. And sometimes you have to let someone see you exactly as you are. No armor. No performance.”

A laugh slips out of me, rough and wet with tears. “Thank you, Lys. I need you more than you know.”

“Anytime, Cel. Always.”

We rise together and drift toward the inner court. The air cools as the sun slides lower, shadows of trees striping the path like they’re writing secrets on the ground. Lys stretches out on the frozen patch of grass once we reach the courtyard, folding her arms behind her head, eyes tracing the clouds with a dreamy smile.

“Sometimes I wish I could run,” she says, almost to the sky itself. “Drop the whole thing and find a place where no one would think to look.”

I sink down beside her, letting the grass prickle my palms. “I get it,” I admit, quieter now. “This life isn’t built for everyone. Some days I feel like a pawn on a board that keeps rewriting its rules mid-game.”

She huffs a short laugh. “Pawns can still checkmate if they learn the board.”

For the first time in days, I smile back at her. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I can learn to play by my own rules.”

Her fingers slip into mine, threading together in a firm squeeze. “And I’ll be right here, helping you write them.”

The rest of the world falls away. No shadows prowling the edges, no battles waiting just out of sight, no truths buried too deep to face. Just us, suspended in a fragile quiet that feels like a stolen gift.

“Thank you for being my friend,” I whisper.

“Thank you for letting me be.”

We linger as evening settles, the air turning crisp enough to raise goosebumps along my arms. Lys tucks her knees to her chest, her chin resting there, and when she speaks again, her voice trembles.

“Do you ever think about what happens if we fail? If everything collapses and the only thing left is the shadows, would we keep fighting? I’m scared we’ll lose what ties us together.”

I hold her gaze, searching past the fear in her eyes for words strong enough. “I know. I’m scared too, which is why we have to be stronger than fear. Not just for us, but for everyone who doesn’t get the chance to fight back.”

She studies me, her eyes sharp now, almost reverent. “You feel it, don’t you? That you’re not just you.”

“Yes.” I let the truth land without running from it. “There are pieces of me still learning who they are, what they want, where they’re going. The others shape me, and I shape them.”

The admission settles like a stone tossed into deep water. Ripples spread between us, and I know she feels them too.

We rise to leave when the sharp crack of shattering glass cuts through the air. A voice booms from hidden speakers, every syllable edged with steel: alert. The portal has spiked. Shade signatures breaching.

My heart jerks hard against my ribs. Lys’s hand clamps around my arm, her grip tight enough to leave marks. Fear flashes in her eyes, quick and bright, but there’s something else underneath it—a steadiness I have learned to trust.

“We move now. No more stalling.”

We break into a run, the soles of our boots hammering stone. The floor vibrates under our weight, faint at first and then stronger, a hum that doesn’t belong to the building. The air shifts, carrying a metallic tang that coats the back of my throat. Everything feels out of tune.

“Command Room.” My voice comes out rough, but certain. “We need eyes on the feed.”

Dread twists tight in my chest, but I force my body forward. I can’t slow down. Not now.

Lys keeps pace beside me, though something about her has changed. Her eyes catch the failing light in a way that makes the hair at the nape of my neck lift, as though shadows are tugging her from within.

“Lys, are you okay?” I catch her arm mid-stride, trying to ground her.

She startles, a quick shake of the head, then meets my gaze with pupils too wide. “Yes. No. I don’t know. The shadows don’t feel like nightmares

anymore. They feel like they know me. It isn’t only empathy. It’s like a signal I almost recognize, but I can’t get a grip on it.”

“Know you how?” The question slips out, thin with disbelief. But her face tells me she isn’t inventing this. Something is clawing at her, and it’s getting louder.

We burst into the Command Room, the doors sliding open on a rush of light and sound. Red strobes flash across the consoles. Screens flicker with distorted feeds—black shapes crawling along a seam in the portal’s seal, edges unraveling like torn fabric.

“It’s worse than the last report,” says an officer at the front, his tone calm but hard-edged. “Energy fluctuations have thinned the seal. If response lags, we’ll have a surge inside Axis Spire.”

The room surges alive. Technicians snap commands into comms. REAPER squads mobilize, armored boots striking rhythm against the floor.

Every station hums with urgency.

Lys drifts toward a side console, her gaze caught by a pulsing bruise of shadow on the nearest screen. A shiver racks her body from shoulder to heel, like the image has touched her nerve endings.

“What is happening to you?” I step close, keeping my voice low.

Her lips part, breath uneven. “I don’t know. They feel familiar. Like they’re carrying something I’ve lost.”

The admission carves a hollow in my chest. I want to demand answers, but the pace of the room allows no space for unraveling mysteries. The air is thick with overlapping voices and alarms going off in short bursts. I stand with Lys at the edge of the command circle, cut off from the real action by more than just space. I’m here, but I might as well be invisible.

A uniformed officer strides toward us, rank gleaming on his collar. His eyes lock on mine, all discipline and concern.

“Miss Nightmoor. Lys. The situation is critical. You cannot deploy. Your gifts could destabilize the breach. One wrong push and the seam widens.”

Lys’s hands curl into fists. “If we don’t fight, who will? If we stand down, what stops it?”

Heat rises in me. “We can help. You know we can. We’re not children.”

His reply lands cold and final. “Only REAPER squads are cleared to engage. You will remain here and support. We cannot risk the heir. One misstep, and we face a massacre. The world still needs your image alive, Miss Nightmoor, not your body on a slab.”

The words choke me. Image. Not my will, not my fire, not the parts of me that fight and bleed. Just a figure they can hold up to the crowd. Fury strikes like flint in my throat, but I bite it back. There’s no room to explode now.

Beside me, Lys trembles, eyes shining with unshed tears. “We wait smart, Celeste,” she whispers, though the tremor in her voice betrays how much she hates it.

The alarm shifts into a piercing shriek. On the lead screen, the fissure yawns wider, black as a wound. Shade forms seep into the Axis Spire courtyard, moving with liquid grace, pooling like oil that has found low ground.

The first breach has begun.

Villin strides in like he owns the room, face locked down, voice steady as steel. “REAPER teams are deploying. I’m taking point. We don’t lose that perimeter.”

My blood boils. Every nerve in me wants to argue, to throw myself into the fight and damn the fallout, but I swallow it back. Picking that battle now

would be suicide.

I grab Lys’s hand and squeeze it tight. Her palm is slick, pulse beating frantic against my skin. “We’ll find our way in,” I tell her, low enough for just her. “One way or another. Together.”

Outside the glass wall, the courtyard churns with motion. Squads snap into place, armor catching the flare of red warning lights. Andrei and Elias move like clockwork, seamless in their rhythm. Villin slices through commands with a voice sharp enough to cut the air.

It feels like the atmosphere itself is thinning, stretching too far. My lungs work harder just to keep up. Every second falls heavy, like a countdown that’s already run out of grace.

The Command Room door scrapes open. The sound is small, but it pulls every gaze in the room.

Councilor Kith El’Mara steps inside. Black mantle stitched with gold, his presence like a storm wrapped in silk. His eyes sweep the space, deliberate and unhurried, and officers straighten as though gravity itself has shifted.

“The breach is worse than forecast,” he says. His tone is low, but it fills every corner. “Yet it is not lost.”

Villin inclines his head. “Kith, the seam widens faster than we can cover it. The courtyard is compromised. My teams are already deployed. Council support is overdue.”

El’Mara raises one hand. The motion alone quiets the air. “I came to restore the balance. The portal is both a hazard and a passage. I can steady it, for a time.”

His voice changes. Older. Rougher. Words fall like stones through deep water, rolling against the edges of the room. The floor hums, vibrations

running up my legs. Screens flicker, then focus—the fissure draws tighter, its edges cinched as if an unseen hand pinches them closed.

Shade forms shudder, hesitate, then recoil. They pull back, thin into streaks, and slip through the seam until the courtyard lies bare again. Only scarred stone and smoke remain.

The whole room seems to let out a breath. Relief spreads through everyone, but nobody calls this a victory. This isn’t winning. This is buying time, and we all know it.

I finally exhale, shaky with relief and dread mixed together. This was only the calm before the storm. The real fight hasn’t started yet—it has been lurking in the shadows all along, waiting for its moment.

Across the room, Villin catches my eye. Amias looks over, too, his expression rock-solid.

Their faces tell the story. We survived today. Tomorrow we pay the price.

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## CELESTE

By the next evening, Villin’s house carries a silence that doesn’t belong. It isn’t the comfortable stillness of a lived-in space after a long day. It feels weighted, the kind that remembers every sound from the night before and presses down until the floorboards groan. We gather at the same table, the three of us, but yesterday’s ease has vanished. No casual glances, no accidental touches, just three people who have stared death in the face and are now waiting for the next card to fall.

I sit straight-backed with my hands clasped in my lap, hiding how deeply the fear has rooted. They don’t know I barely slept. They don’t know I kept replaying the breach until dawn, or that my thoughts keep catching on the look in Lys’s eyes when the shadows rose.

The silence holds too long before Villin cuts it with a rough drag of his hand through his hair. His expression is carved with tension, but his voice carries purpose. “We need a clear direction.” The faint trace of coffee lingers in the air, though the cups on the table are untouched.

“Kith El’Mara bought us some breathing room when he stabilized the portal,” Villin says, steady now. “William is already moving his pieces, and we’re short on leverage. If we want the archives plan to mean anything, we act now.”

The words scrape my throat, bitter and heavy, but I push them out anyway. “Then I’ll start today. I need access to the Historical Archive and the Resonance ritual records. There has to be a loophole, some exception we can twist.”

Amias leans back, eyes focused past the wall as if he can see the puzzle forming in the air. “I’ve already pulled a shortlist of proscribed texts on crossing energies. If I can trace how the fissure came together, I might map a reversal. Or lock it tight for good.”

Villin’s gaze snaps to me, sharp and unyielding. “Celeste stays protected.” The words hit like a brick wall.

Heat rises along my spine. “I’m not made of porcelain,” I snap.

He doesn’t blink. He just holds me in that hard stare for a beat before letting it fade. Not now, but he’ll circle back. That is Villin. Always measuring.

I draw my knees in under the table. My thoughts scatter like leaves caught in a gust. The room feels too wide. Too unsteady.

Then the words slip before I can rein them in. “Lys felt pulled toward the shadows.”

Amias jolts, focus snapping back like a whip. Villin’s brow lifts, sharp and questioning. “What did you just say?”

My pulse kicks. “It was nothing. She was tired. I was on edge. Maybe I imagined it.”

But I can’t shake it. That image keeps replaying—the Shades holding her still like she already belonged to them.

Amias leans closer, calm and anchored. “Talk to her. Quietly. Don’t rush it. Let her come to the truth at her own pace.”

The words hang between us, steady as a lighthouse beam. I nod, swallowing the knot in my throat, and feel the first flicker of a plan forming, fragile but real.

Villin doesn’t add a word, yet the same knot of worry tightens in his eyes.

Silence stretches between us, sharp and thin, each of us holding our breath like we’re waiting for a match to drop. I am the first to light it.

“If I treat this ritual like a cleansing, a way to turn me into the thing he feared my mother was,” I say, letting the thought out, “what if the only path to my real power is leaning into the hybrid? That is, assuming I even make it through the next few days. With my father here, odds are not in my favor.”

Villin closes his eyes for a long beat, as if the answer carries a weight he isn’t ready to name. “We will not let it come to that, Celeste. You will not die.”

“I don’t need promises anymore. I need plans.” The words taste like ash.

Amias rises and steps toward me, his presence protective, grounded, almost guarding. It’s strange after that night, and exactly what I need. “Then we fight with everything we’ve got,” he says. “Your mind, his influence, my sight past the veil. No blind corners. No secrets left untouched.”

I glance between them and feel something take shape in the ache, jagged but growing. A team, if a dangerous one. A triangle that shouldn’t work, which might be why it will.

“We have seven days until the next formal assembly,” I say, letting the words land. “We will have a plan on paper by then.”

Villin steps close, just enough to graze my fingers with a light, unsteady touch. Every nerve in my hand responds, but I don’t pull away. “We will find a way,” he says. “I give you my word.”

For the first time in days, I want to believe a single truth can still hold weight in a world that stopped listening. The feeling rises anyway, quiet and stubborn, insistently real.

Something is off with Lys. If she is part of a larger pattern, I need to see it. I can’t ignore it. I am not ready to say it out loud either.

We clear the table, too lost in our thoughts to say anything else. Villin leads us into his home office. The hour has settled into the kind of late-evening tension that makes sleep feel distant. Half-light spills from the desk lamp, painting the bottle of whiskey gold, catching the rough-cut crystals on the shelves, and glinting off the broad back of his leather chair. Maps of Elmaris line the walls, corners brittle with age. They almost look alive under the lamplight while Villin stares past them, like he’s reading something the rest of us can’t see.

One glass sits empty; the other is nearly drained. I fold my arms, working to keep the nervous pull out of my shoulders. A message is coming. Nothing good ever introduces itself in a room like this.

“It’s set,” Villin says at last, low and steady. “The ball. Two days from now.”

My chest tightens. “The ball?”

“Tradition,” he says. “A test, a spectacle. A parade for the noble houses and the people pulling strings behind the curtains.”

He pours again and takes a swallow, as if the whiskey is holding the walls up.

“And me?”

“You’re the centerpiece,” he says.

The words land hard.

“Your first,” he continues. “You skipped your debut at eighteen. General Nightmoor argued the heir should step into the light. This one is built on your absence, on old rules and expectations that don’t fit anymore.”

Anger flares hot and fast. He showed up at the Council and let fear do the talking, waiting for shadows to turn into monsters. Coward.

“So I’m the star of a political pageant built on a dying world,” I say through my teeth.

“Yes,” Villin agrees.

I pace the rug, eyes tracking the wall of books. The air smells of scorched parchment, whiskey, and a faint thread of vanilla. “What’s his real play?” I ask. “What’s the endgame?”

“To control you,” Villin growls. “To put you on display. To see who blinks first. To force a chain reaction with clean hands.”

I take a slow breath, letting it anchor me. “And my role?”

“You smile. You wear your power like armor and act like the queen you are. You let us pull his plans apart from the inside. After that night, nothing will look the same.”

My hands curl into fists. “Then if this is the stage, we give them a show they won’t forget.”

Amias steps closer, almost gliding across the rug. His glass tilts, nearly empty, but his green eyes burn with a fire I haven’t seen before. “That’s the woman from my visions,” he says. “The one people follow.”

I don’t know if he means me, the shadow of my mother’s power, or both. Maybe it’s the version of myself I haven’t claimed yet. Either way, running is off the table. Not this time.

“Then we get to work,” I say, letting the words land with quiet authority.

A voice inside me whispers, louder than I want to admit. *Let the war begin.*

I glance back at Villin, watching him take a measured swallow, then meet my eyes with a gentleness I rarely catch. It isn’t a weakness. It’s protection, rare and startling, something solid to anchor to in the chaos.

“We’ll portal to London at eight in the morning,” Villin says. “I know the dressmaker for House Tarrow. Minor house, major skill. She’s worked for the strongest families in Elmaris and for the old-line mages who stayed Earthside. She’ll make a gown worthy of who you are.”

I let out a short, humorless laugh and push back from the chair. “I don’t want a single thing bought with my father’s money.”

His eyes narrow. He doesn’t answer at once.

“I’ll borrow something from Lys,” I add, heat rising in my chest. “Or I’ll wear my training blacks. I’m not stepping onto that floor in a glittering gown because William wants to parade a puppet.”

“It’s not William’s money,” Villin says finally. “It’s mine. The gown is my gift. Not to put you in a glass case, but because you deserve it.”

My heart skips a beat. “I don’t want to look like my mother. I don’t want to be a symbol. I’m not a trophy for any man.”

“You won’t be a trophy. You’ll be a threat. That’s the point. Every eye is on you. Every throat is tight with fear. Royal blood on display, a reminder you’re not a runaway anymore.”

I want to roll my eyes, to tell him he’s impossible, but all I feel is a sharp, confusing tug of warmth. It feels like being shielded in the middle of a storm.

“So,” he says, stepping closer, “eight in the morning. No one there gets to decide if you exist. You take that right. You dominate it.”

The air between us thickens, heavy with everything we aren’t saying. I give the smallest nod. He smiles, triumphant in that quiet, careful way, like he just won the first round of a long fight.

“Fine,” I mutter. “But I’m choosing the dress and the shoes. End of discussion.”

He laughs under his breath and tops off his glass. “Deal, Miss Nightmoor.”

I look around the office—at the maps on the walls, at the whiskey catching the lamplight, at the man daring me to take up every inch of the space I’m owed—and I wonder if I’m going to dance at that ball, or if I’m going to light the first match.

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## CELESTE

I do not sleep. My head feels like a crowded room, every thought talking over the next, every feeling elbowing for space. I lie on my back, staring at the ceiling, keeping time with the wall clock downstairs in Villin's house. Each tick lands like a slap, a reminder of everything I cannot bend to my will.

The ball looms over me, a stone of a threat I can't ignore. The idea of standing at the center of a room built for judgment, smiling through a mask while people who have played this game longer than I've been alive weigh me like a chess piece, makes my lungs seize. I keep circling what "presentable" even means. I keep picturing a dress Villin thinks fits the night, a gown meant for power and calculation, not elegance.

Beneath all that, my thoughts drift to them. Andrei, dense and quiet, with a gaze that speaks in sentences I don't hear. Elias, fragile in new ways but unbreakable in the ones that matter, a strength that makes me want to step in front of him and catch the arrows life might throw. Amias, eyes deep and endless, a bond stitched from visions and unspoken words that ache across

the distance between us. Villin, everything he shouldn't be—dangerous, relentless, ruinous—and somehow more alive than anyone I've ever known.

I roll onto my side and let the shadows swallow me. My chest tightens. Each name pulls me in a different direction. Each heartbeat reminds me I cannot hide, cannot retreat, cannot pretend the storm outside has nothing to do with me. The clock ticks on, and I am wide awake, caught in the swell of a night that will not end.

A little after seven, I give up pretending I can rest. My eyes sting and my chest feels tight. I drift through my room like a ghost, grab a silk robe, and slip into the bath. The door clicks shut behind me, and I let it all slide off—clothes, defenses, the last hour of self-control.

The water pounds against my skin, steam curling thick around me, but no heat can burn them out of me. Andrei's silence, carved into him like bone. Elias's kiss, trembling and sharp, the moment where fear bled into surrender. Villin, speaking my name like it was both command and prayer. Amias, his hand trembling against my cheek, hunger wrapped tight in devotion.

I brace my palms against the glass, forehead bowed, letting the scalding spray soak into my bones while my body begs for more. The ache between my thighs has lived in me since last night—restless, throbbing, insistent. I trail my hand lower, over slick skin, parting myself open until my fingers press to my clit, swollen and pulsing. I circle hard, desperate, until my knees threaten to give.

A broken gasp escapes me, drowned in the rush of water. I move faster, rougher, my pussy is wet and eager under my touch. My hips snap forward, chasing friction, grinding against the heel of my palm as though I could summon one of them into me by sheer will.

My breath fogs the glass. Their names choke in my throat, unspoken but searing. Villin. Amias. Elias. Andrei. Every stroke feels like theirs. Every surge of heat is a promise of what they're still holding back.

I sink two fingers into myself, my pussy clenches down hard, craving more, craving what it has never known. The stretch burns, sharp, but I drive deeper, curling my fingers as my palm grinds against my clit. My thighs tremble. My spine bows. I fuck myself harder, chasing the breaking point.

Release tears through me, savage and consuming. My cunt spasms around my fingers, hot and wet, pleasure spilling out in violent waves. The cry that rips from my throat is raw, ripped open, too loud for the shower to swallow. It is messy and brutal, more confession than release, and I can't stop riding it until I'm shuddering, undone, breath ragged against the glass.

Water and tears streak together down my face. Not sorrow. Not shame. Only the raw weight of being alive. Of needing too much. Of wanting all of them until I am certain, I'll split apart.

And still—wrecked, trembling, slick and ruined in the steam—I am a virgin.

I step from the shower, skin flushed and humming, the robe a poor excuse for armor. I wrap it around me anyway and pad into the bedroom, heart still beating too fast.

He is there.

Villin stands at the window, a shadow against the morning light. His eyes find mine the second I move. Sharp. Hungry. Unyielding. I notice the thick line straining against his trousers. The corner of his mouth lifts in a crooked smile that promises trouble with a wink.

"You're late," he says, voice low and rough enough to raise goosebumps.

I bite my lip and feel the heat creep up my neck.

“Coffee is downstairs. Get dressed. Now.”

It isn’t a request. I nod and turn. The fire in his eyes follows me to the door and keeps burning after I step out.

My pulse races as I pull on a simple black top and loose cream pants. I twist my hair into a quick knot and try to calm my nerves. My reflection catches me in the mirror.

“You’re ridiculous, Celeste,” I whisper. “You’re not a hormonal teenager.”

I shouldn’t care that he saw me lose it, but I do anyway. He didn’t mock me, didn’t tease, didn’t say a word. His quiet feels heavier, more intimate than any joke could.

The stairs groan under my weight. Coffee hits my nose before the doorway does, vanilla curling with the warmth of whiskey and a faint floral note beneath it. The scent feels like a secret tied to the house and somehow to us.

He stands at the sink, mug in hand. I slide into a chair without meeting his eyes, cheeks burning, and my spine stiff. If he can pretend last night never happened, I can match him beat for beat.

He sets a mug in front of me. “We’re on the clock.”

“I know,” I murmur, lifting it. I take a slow sip, forcing my pulse to settle.

The corner of his mouth twitches. Not quite a smile, more like a warning.

“Of course, princess.”

My heart stutters. When he says it, there’s no teasing, no sarcasm—just weight.

I rise, take my coat from the back of the chair, and slip my hand into his. My stomach flips the way it always does before a portal. I shut my eyes, hating the sensation and knowing he feels it too. Magic coils around us, cold and precise, then releases us.

We appear in a narrow London mews. Brick walls rise on either side, thick with ivy, and low clouds press down, a slice of sunlight cutting through. The city hums, quiet but full, as if it's holding secrets just for us.

"We're close," he says, voice tight. I hum softly, wrapping my coat tighter. The air is damp and sharp, clean with the scent of rain and stone. Thoughts tumble through my mind, bouncing off cobbles and walls, relentless and impossible to quiet.

He's picking up the tab for the gown. Pride twists in my chest. Villin has never asked for anything back. I learned early that nothing in this life comes free, not even kindness. Still, the way he gives me room but never lets the space stretch too far makes me want to believe there's an exception. Maybe there is. Or maybe I've just forgotten how to take things at face value.

"She's an old friend," he says, and the sincerity in his voice makes me straighten. "She won't judge you."

"I don't need judgment spared," I say. "I need pity spared."

He stops and sizes me up like he's reading a map I can't see. "Nobody pities you, Celeste. People see danger when they look at you. This dress? It's just another kind of weapon."

A flash of a smile brushes his lips before he tucks it away. Inside, I feel like sharp edges pressed against the wrong board, a piece dropped into a game I never agreed to, in a room where everyone else already knows the play.

We push through a plain, unmarked door. No sign, just dark oak and a bell that rings sweetly when it opens. The air changes as we step inside. The walls are lined with fabrics and lace, silk threaded with gold, colors bleeding toward deep wine. The scent hits me—old wood, lavender, black

tea. Black-and-white photos of impossibly gorgeous gowns march the walls like sentinels.

A woman with pearl-white hair and round glasses looks up and beams as if she knew we were coming.

“Aha. Villin,” she says, crossing the room with a poise that makes age irrelevant. “Finally acting like a king, not just looking the part.”

“Celeste, this is Madame Seraphine,” Villin says. “Dressmaker for the Council, and sometimes my conscience.”

“So you’re the little heir,” she says, eyes sparkling. “I dreamed you in crimson velvet, walking across glass, smiling the whole way.”

For a second, I can’t find words. Villin presses his lips into a thin line and holds back. He doesn’t have to say anything; the weight in the room says it all.

“In the back with you,” she says, her hand firm but gentle, steering me along. “Clothes don’t lie, but they don’t choose themselves either. You just breathe. I’ll handle the rest.”

She leads me into a mirrored room, and the air shifts, heavy with expectation. Her hands move like they were made for fabric, sure and deliberate, as she strips me down to my underwear and slips a test gown over my head. Imperial blue, sharp and commanding, it settles on me as if it’s always been part of me.

“You’re holding tight,” she murmurs, calm but insistent. “Good dresses don’t lie. They cinch when the heart lets go. You have to loosen something if you want it to sit right. Your soul. Or your throat.”

A quiet laugh escapes me. I don’t know if I should argue or just nod. I lift my chin and meet my reflection. For the first time in weeks, I see myself. Not the hunted girl, not the lost heir. Something in between. A woman who

hasn’t made all her choices yet but is starting to understand that real power comes from standing your ground, not running away.

I feel Villin behind me, his presence radiating like heat through the glass. Shame doesn’t rise. Only gratitude. Neither of us says a word. Our eyes meet in the reflection for a fraction of a second, and something clicks. This is the beginning, not just of a ball, but of a version of me that could set fire to the room if that’s what it takes.

Madame Seraphine moves through the fabrics like a conductor warming an orchestra. Velvet, silk, tulle stitched with care, heirloom pieces, spellbound creations. My fingers trail over an emerald gown with sheer sleeves and a train that could make even the most composed courtiers pause. Every shimmer, every swish, tells a story. And I’m right in the middle of it.

“Lovely,” she says, a sharp edge under the praise, “but not yours. You need something that flips the room inside out, not a dress that asks permission.”

I turn and see it. Alone on a separate stand. Blood-red silk, fluid and decadent, strapless, with a sweetheart neckline that seems to follow the curve of my collarbones just by looking. A slit runs daringly high along the thigh.

“That one.”

Seraphine tilts her head, like she’s been waiting for me to pick it. “Not a dress,” she says. “A warning.”

I can’t help the smile that flickers across my face. My fingers brush the silk. It whispers under my touch. Power hums in the weave, sharp and unyielding. It says I am more than a pawn, more than a daughter. I am Celeste Nightmoor, and I am done hiding behind lace.

“Not yet,” I murmur. “I want it for the ball. Let it land like a thunderclap. No one sees it. Not even him.”

Seraphine’s grin curves into something conspiratorial. “Good. Secrets are everything. No king deserves a queen revealed before her time.”

I roll my eyes and let it slide. An assistant helps me back into my street clothes. Before I can step out, Seraphine returns with a white box tied in a gold ribbon.

“A dress is nothing without the steps that carry it,” she says. She lifts the lid. Inside rests a pair of gold heels, slim and perfectly balanced, the leather catching the light, buckles delicate and precise.

“Villin chose them,” she adds casually. “I didn’t let him see the gown. I only told him the color. Call it a lucky guess.”

Something tightens in my chest. Not because of the price or the shine, but because he knew and didn’t try to steer the choice.

“Please don’t tell him,” I murmur. “Not yet. Not until the night.”

“As you wish. For the record, men almost never pick the right shoes. He did.”

I turn back to the mirror. Black top, cream pants, nothing fancy, and still I feel stamped in that red silk. A dress that doesn’t apologize. A dress that doesn’t offer excuses.

I promise myself that when I wear it, I won’t be a pretty girl in a pretty gown. I’ll be the threat in the room.

Seraphine folds me into a hug stronger than she looks. She smells of patchouli, old lavender, and black tea. She holds me just a beat longer than expected and whispers, “Don’t forget who you are, little one, and never who you could become.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. No tears. Not here. Not with crimson silk in a bag, gold shoes, and a future waiting outside that hasn't been cut yet.

We step into the London evening, the sun slides off slate roofs, fading fast as car lights take over. Villin waits on the shop steps, his expression unreadable, packages balanced on one arm. The white shoe box. The heavy garment bag. All of it carried like it's nothing.

"Seriously," I say, raising a brow. "You don't have a soldier for that?"

"They're too expensive to trust anyone else," he says without missing a beat.

We fall into step through central London. The city moves in a rush, but for us, the streets feel stretched, almost patient. Stone facades, steamed café windows. London smells of old rain, asphalt, and a hint of roses.

"The dress is too much," I murmur. "Too much for what I deserve."

"It's not enough for who you are," he responds, eyes straight ahead. "You're not a monster's daughter, Celeste. You're a queen's heir."

I stop. His words settle against my ribs like they know the way in.

"How do you know I won't break," I ask, "under everything you all keep asking me to carry?"

He turns, arms still full, and meets my gaze head-on. "Because you've walked into the dark and come back shining."

I have no answer. Every syllable feels like a promise I both want and fear.

Our steps match without effort. He carries the bags like it's nothing, eyes scanning windows, people, the sky. He notices everything and says almost nothing.

I notice him.

Something tightens in my chest. For a single second, he is not the cold commander. He is a man with his hands full, carrying the weight so I don't have to, after refusing help like my reaching out insulted his honor.

"Why so quiet?" he asks finally.

"I'm trying not to overthink."

He tilts his mouth in a crooked half-smile. "You're pushing a river uphill. Your mind's a whirlpool."

I fold my arms and stay silent. He lets the tension roll off me, then looks over, and this time the glance lands like gravity.

"You don't like the dress," he says.

"I do," I admit. "It's perfect. That's the problem."

He stops. "Tell me."

I look at him, but the words choke in my throat. So much wants to come out. I want to tell him I dreamed of a dress like that. I want to say I value the effort. That when Madame Seraphine hugged me, when he waited outside without prying, I felt seen for the first time in ages.

None of that comes out. I say, "I don't know how to handle what's happening between us."

"Between us."

Yes. Between me and Villin. Not Amias. Not Elias or Andrei. Something that shouldn't exist, with a man who should be my enemy, yet sees me, touches me without breaking, pushes without crushing.

"I keep trying not to feel," I say. "It's useless. You try to be cold, and you're not. I feel how you look at me. I feel how you hold yourself back. And sometimes, I don't want you to."

The ice in his eyes softens. He drags his tongue over his lower lip and exhales slowly. "I don't know how to handle it either," he admits. "I'm not

sure I want to."

"Should you?" I ask.

"No," he whispers. "But I'll try anyway. For you."

I jam my hands into my coat pockets to stop myself from reaching for him. The space between us feels fragile. Say too much and it cracks. Say nothing, and it detonates.

"Villin," I start, letting the truth land clean. "I'm not ready. For a choice. For consequences. For all of it."

"And still, you keep moving," he says. "Every time."

He smiles. Not ironic. Not superior. Almost proud.

We pass a flower stall, jasmine and mint rising to meet us. The last slice of sun breaks the clouds, staining the street gold. That's when it hits me. I'm not in love with the idea of Villin. I'm in love with the man under the armor.

I can't do anything with that. Not today. There will be a day when running isn't an option. Not from him. Not from myself.

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## VILLIN

By the time we portal back, night has already settled over Axis Spire. Alaska's air hits harder than London's. It's clean, cold enough to cut through fogged thoughts, and familiar enough to remind me this is my ground. Whatever comes next will happen here.

I carry Celeste's dress and the shoe box like they're weapons made of glass. I should look away, but I don't. Not when she climbs the steps, coat framing her throat and cheekbones, the line of her neck set like a spine of iron. She wears her silence the way a crown wears jewels.

I let her enter first and close the door behind us. The house greets her with its usual mix of whiskey, vanilla, and smoke, a scent that clings to wood and memory. For a beat, it feels as if it has been waiting for her. As if I have.

"Tea?" I ask, breaking the stillness. "Ginger and lemon?"

She nods and curls into the sofa, legs tucked under, eyes fixed on the fire. I move through the kitchen on muscle memory while my thoughts refuse to fall in line. I keep picturing her in the red silk, skin lit like a promise, the

flash of thigh, the spark in her eyes. She is a risk to me, to the plan, to the balance. I could stop, but I no longer want to.

When I bring her the mug, she is still watching the flames. Then she lifts her gaze, and it hits like a strike.

“Why do you do all this for me?” Her voice is soft, almost hesitant.

“Because no one else will get it right,” I answer, lowering myself near her. Not too close, not too far.

“That’s not enough.”

She’s right. It’s the safe reason, the one I can defend without cracks. The truth is a wall losing bricks every time she looks at me like this.

“I was raised in a world where everything was counted,” I say. “Planned, controlled, checked twice. Then you walked in and set my map on fire.”

“Do you regret it?” she asks.

“Only when I think about what I would have missed if I'd never met you.”

She doesn’t say anything, but I can see it all over her face, that soft look she gets that has nothing to do with words and everything to do with just being close.

So I don’t push. I let the silence be what it is. She leans her head against my shoulder, and I stop fighting it. I reach for her hand, gentle and easy, not trying to prove anything. Just wanting to touch her.

Everything coming up is going to be a mess—the ball, the rituals, William. Tonight I let all of that go. Tonight, I just let myself feel what I feel.

Her hair is still damp, cool against my collarbone. Her breath evens, warm against my skin, and she drifts into sleep steady as the tide. A part of me wants to live in this minute, stripped of commands and expectations, nothing but the weight of her resting against me.

I cannot leave her on the sofa. I slide my arms beneath her and lift. She fits against me like she was made for it, a truth that settles deeper than reason. Her scent curls around me, floral, edged with something warmer I cannot name, the kind of addictive note that slips down a man's throat and refuses to let go.

The floor groans under each step. I carry her through shadow, climb the stairs by memory, hold her tighter than I should. At her door, I stop. I could lay her down, close the door, and pretend this was nothing more than a fleeting lapse.

Instead, I turn and take her to my room.

I set her on the bed and draw a blanket across her shoulders. For a moment, I only look. Her lashes cast faint shadows. Her lips part as if she is about to speak in her sleep. It should not ache to see her this way—still, safe, unguarded. It does.

Perched on the bed's edge, I drag a hand over my face. I've known this was a mistake from the start. I knew it the day I gave the order to take her. I knew it when I kept her close instead of pushing her away. I knew it most in the moment I stopped pretending I didn't want her.

Calling it an attraction would be the easy lie. But this—whatever it is—isn't simple. Not with her. Not with Celeste.

I stand, let my eyes rest on her one last time, and the truth breaks loose in a whisper meant for no one's ears but the walls. "You have no idea what you're doing to me."

The office waits. A half-empty bottle. A hundred thoughts whiskey never shuts up. I close the door behind me and turn the lock without thinking. No interruptions. No witnesses.

The swallow burns all the way down as I sink into the leather chair. My hand trembles as I slide it under my shirt, fingertips dragging across my chest like I'm chasing the ghost of her touch. Her scent clings to this house, wild and floral with a dangerous edge, impossible to scrub out, impossible to forget.

I undo my belt with trembling fingers, my breath ragged and shallow. I can still feel her against me, heat pressed into my skin, the curve of her body, the taste of her breath lingering on my neck. My pants hit the floor, and my hand slides inside my boxers, fingers closing around my cock. Hard. Hungry. Burning in a way that makes my chest ache.

She is the only thing I see when I close my eyes. Bare skin, steam rising from her shoulders, the robe slipping free. The memory hits like a blow, stealing my breath and leaving me raw. I groan low, my hips driving into my fist, desperate, unrelenting.

I start slow, teasing myself, but it's not enough. I am too far gone. My hand moves faster, harder, building pressure until my chest and balls burn. I see her in my mind, every inch of her claiming me, her hands pressing, grasping, as if she already owns me.

I imagine her straddling me, hips rolling, pussy slick and aching. My thumb circles the head, and I stroke with a hunger that will not relent.

My pulse hammers like it wants to tear through my chest. My breath comes jagged, shallow, each inhale a hiss of need. My cock throbs in my hand, every stroke lighting a fire through my body. Fingers tremble, knuckles whitening against my own skin, thumb circling the tip until it aches, until every nerve is sharp and raw. Heat thrums through my veins, spreading, curling, making me dizzy and desperate.

I can feel it building, rising like it has a mind of its own, hot and heavy and impossible to contain. My hips jerk without thought, every stroke closer, closer, until it crashes over me. I shatter, thick and ruthless, pleasure ripping through me in waves that shake my entire body. I grip the chair, grind my teeth, and let it take me, loud, sharp, and all-consuming.

Even as the haze fades, one thought refuses to leave. Nothing will ever be enough until I have her. I will take her, keep her, consume her with every dark, relentless part of me. She is mine in ways she will never see coming, and I will make sure she feels it, every time, every moment.

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## CELESTE

I surface slowly, drifting between dream and daylight, folded into the heat of silk sheets. The room is quiet enough to make me suspicious of my own breathing. Light slips through the heavy curtains and paints soft shadows across the walls. What wakes me fully is the warmth at my back, a steady presence that belongs to this bed and to the man in it.

Villin.

I feel him before I even turn. He's stretched beside me, solid and calm, one arm draped across my waist. His breath brushes the nape of my neck and sends a shiver down my spine. He stayed. Not just when he carried me here. He stayed because he wanted to, because he could.

I try to shift without waking him. He notices anyway.

"It's early, Celeste," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep.

I tense, maybe because the softness in him is too real.

"What am I doing here?" I roll carefully to see his face.

His eyes open slowly, darker than usual and stripped of armor. No sarcasm, no command, only honesty and something that feels like regret.

“You fell asleep on the sofa,” he says. “I wanted to make sure you were all right. I couldn’t leave you there.”

I bite my lip and glance around the room. It looks as I remember, gothic, restrained. Tall curtains. Heavy wood. A floor that groans under the slightest weight. A painting hangs above the headboard, too dark to make out in the half-light. The bed is a kingdom of black silk and trouble.

“You shouldn’t have brought me in here,” I whisper.

“You didn’t stop me.”

It stings because it’s true. I didn’t. Maybe I didn’t want to. Something in him—the way he sees me—pushes and pulls like a tide I can’t hold back.

“Do you remember anything?” he asks, gentler than I’ve ever heard him.

I shake my head. “Only fire. A dream, I think.”

“It was real. You reached for me in your sleep. You said my name.”

Heat floods my face. I look at the ceiling and consider disappearing.

“It didn’t mean anything,” I say too quickly. “A scrambled dream. Too many shocks, too little sleep.”

“You don’t owe me a defense,” he says, voice steady again. The commander is back, though a seam of vulnerability lingers.

I sit up and gather myself. “I should get ready. The day will be long. The ball is coming.”

He nods and swings his legs over the side. “I’ll make coffee.”

There’s the ghost of a smile, so brief I’m not sure it happened, and then he’s gone.

For a moment, I stand in the wreck of the covers. His scent clings to the sheets—vanilla and woodsmoke with a shadow of whiskey. None of it should feel like comfort, and yet near him, those notes keep rewriting the word home.

I cross to his bathroom and pause at the mirror. I look more rested than I deserve. The shadows under my eyes have softened against my pale skin.

The room behind me steals my attention in the reflection. It belongs in a magazine. I grew up with wealth, but I missed this kind of luxury for almost seven years. Not like this. The toilet is tucked away. A marble shower spans from ceiling to floor, wide enough for five if they were feeling friendly. By the window sits a tub for two that practically begs for bubbles and a glass of champagne. Across the room, a cedar sauna glows faintly.

I strip and step under the shower. The water hits as hot as it will go and loosens something clenched inside me. I grab the first body wash within reach. Vanilla. *Of course*. I scrub fast, rinse faster, then towel off and slip into my own room to get dressed.

By the time I reach the kitchen, my hair is still damp and my heart is still playing catch-up. He stands at the counter with his back to me, movements deliberate and precise. A charcoal shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, veins tracing his forearms like fine lines under warm skin. He pours with a focus that feels almost ritual, like the simple act is holding the day together.

“Morning again,” I say, sliding into the chair.

He sets a mug in front of me. Cinnamon curls up in the steam. Only when he sits across from me do our eyes lock. His gaze is softer than usual, calm but unreadable, like he’s holding something back.

“Feeling any better after yesterday?” His voice drops on the last word, deliberate, testing.

“Physically, yes. Mentally, I wouldn’t put money on it.”

He nods. “It was a rough stretch. We’re not out of the woods yet.”

“I know.” I wrap my hands around the mug; the heat seeps into my fingers. “And I woke up in your bed. Again.”

His mouth tightens, and for a second, he's calculating, weighing what to say. "I didn't mean to overstep. You were wiped. I stayed because I wanted to make sure you were safe."

"You didn't say a word this morning," I press. "No teasing. No joke to cut the tension."

"Because it wasn't a joke," he says. "It was real."

I take a sip, eyes on the coffee, but I can feel him. The air between us is heavy—not hostile, but charged, like we're both waiting for something neither of us can say.

"What are you doing with me, Villin?" I ask before I can stop myself. The words feel raw, unguarded. I don't want to admit it, but I do. Just this once.

He sets his mug down carefully, his gaze never leaving mine. "I'm keeping you safe. I respect you. I'm showing up, even when I'm not sure I know the right way."

I hold his gaze. "I can't make a choice. I'm saying it again. I feel different things with each of you, and it's all real. I'm not playing anyone."

"I know," he says, the corner of his mouth twitches like a warning. "I'm not asking for a choice. If you ever make one, it has to be for you. Not out of guilt or obligation."

I draw a slow breath and grip the mug a little tighter. "I need to be honest. Sometimes you're the one putting up the wall."

His gaze darkens, then levels out. "I wasn't taught another way. I'm learning. With you, I'm trying."

A tight knot rises in my throat. I swallow it and push myself to my feet.

"I should get ready," I say. "It feels like the weight of the whole world is on my shoulders."

"You're not alone," he says. "You don't have to haul it all yourself."

I tilt my head toward him and let a small smile slip through. “Then I hope your back is as strong as your arms.”

He frowns like he wants to argue, then lets out a short, rough laugh. “Stronger than it looks.”

I leave the kitchen with measured steps while my chest burns. I don’t know what comes next. All I know is that with Villin, every word carries more weight than it should.

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## CELESTE

I don’t know why Villin keeps insisting I stay in his bedroom instead of coming downstairs. There’s something in his eyes when he says, “Trust me,” that shuts down every question I want to ask. I’m not usually someone who lets anyone steer me, but right now I feel strangely calm. Maybe I’m just too tired to fight.

I’ve just indulged myself in his ridiculous marble tub, shaved every last inch, and wrapped my damp hair in a towel. I’m still in a silk robe when I hear the first click of heels on the stairs. The door swings open, and Lys bursts in like a whirlwind.

“I swear, sometimes I love that man,” she laughs, hands flying. “Celeste, you have no idea what he set up.”

Before I can speak, four more women stream in like a well-drilled squad. All black outfits, serious faces, professional energy. Two more follow, one rolling a metal trunk, the other carrying velvet hangers.

“What is all this?” I ask, lifting a brow.

“Your gift,” Lys says, grinning. “Ball prep. An elite glam team, by Villin’s orders.”

I start to protest, but a woman with almond eyes and cool, steady fingers touches my cheeks like she’s reading a map.

“Her skin is dehydrated,” she says. “Gold mask with caviar extract. Now.”

“Wait, what?” I start, but Lys squeezes my shoulders.

“Don’t fight the luxury, babe. You might actually like it.”

So I let them work.

They comb, twist, and lift my hair into soft, impossible structures before letting it fall in a controlled cascade. They curl my lashes, revive my lips, and massage my hands with a dozen tiny miracles I’ve never heard of. I feel remade. It takes me back to the old house, the gold mirror, the crown I never wore.

In the corner, Lys is nearly done. Her hair is pinned into a rebellious bun, liner winged sharp enough to cut. She looks like a punk princess ready to take on a world that doesn’t deserve her.

“Villin really did all this?” I whisper.

She nods. “Yes. Not because he had to. Because he wanted to.”

I study my reflection and wrestle with it. The fear, the doubt, the role I never asked to play, they’re all there. But something else stares back, too. Power. A slow burn that refuses to die.

When the team finishes, someone brings the red dress. The one I chose on instinct. Silk that flows over my skin like fresh blood, a slit climbing nearly to my hip, a sweetheart neckline, and a corseted bodice that frames every breath. Bold. Dangerous. Regal.

“Villin will be leveled,” one of the artists says with a conspiratorial grin.

“I hope he drops from aesthetic shock,” Lys mutters.

The gold heels are flawless, delicate straps, criminally high. I buckle them in silence. For the first time, the mirror doesn't reflect a runaway. It shows a woman reclaiming her throne.

"Ready?" Lys asks, holding my hand.

"Not even close," I admit. "But I will be."

"Then let's leave Villin speechless."

We share a grin, conspirators on the edge of a night no one will forget.

I head downstairs, my heart pounding against my ribs. Each step echoes through Villin's house, carrying years of buried longing, a tempest of things left unsaid, and every vow I've been too terrified to speak aloud. Lys follows close behind, whispering, "If neither of them looks ready to drop dead from wanting you, we completely wasted our time on that hair."

I let out a shaky laugh, then freeze when I reach the bottom.

Amias and Villin both rise at the same time. Their black suits are perfect, fitted like second skins, their faces stark under the light. The gravity of their stares hits me like a physical force. Both of them radiate a different kind of dangerous intensity, and it's all focused on me. Every nerve in my body goes wire-taut. I've just walked into the eye of a hurricane I have no hope of controlling.

Amias's gaze darkens, unsure whether he's angry or undone by the way I unravel him. He reaches me first, eyes locked on the line of my leg. He swallows and takes my hand.

"I wish I could lay the whole world at your feet," he murmurs. "Tonight I'll stand beside you. That will have to be enough."

He lifts my fingers to his mouth, tender enough to make me forget where I am.

Then I feel the other presence. Villin.

I turn.

He braces himself, shoulders tight, like a man ready for an impact he invited. Something smolders in his eyes. Pride. Vulnerability. Maybe more. He steps forward and offers a small velvet box.

“It’s not your mother’s,” he says quietly. “It’s yours. Made for you. One of a kind.”

My hands shake as I open it.

Inside rests a tiara of white gold, with carefully set diamonds. Perfect. Not for the girl I used to be, not for the title anyone thinks I owe. It belongs to the woman standing here.

“Villin…”

“You don’t have to wear it,” he says, looking aside. “I wanted tonight to start with something no one can take from you. Not your past. Not your father. Not Elmaris. No one.”

I study him. The set jaw. The rigid shoulders. The way he avoids my eyes. And then I see him. Not the commander. The man who keeps me close without crushing me. The one who knows me without demanding a confession.

I step forward and press my palm to his chest. “I’ll wear it.”

His breath hitches. He meets my gaze, and for the first time tonight, he smiles, real and unguarded.

“Then you are ready, Celeste.”

I turn to Lys and do not need to speak. She already knows. Carefully, she lifts the box and sets the tiara on my head as if in a ritual. The house goes quiet. I can feel both of them watching. Amias with a reverent hunger. Villin with a steady calm that hides a war beneath.

For once, I do not feel like I am wearing a mask.

I feel like I am wearing the truth.

Amias and Lys leave, and suddenly it’s only Villin and me, standing together, expected to make an appearance.

We step into the back garden, and when Villin opens the portal, something inside me tightens. His magic is precise, controlled, and cold as always. The moment his hand closes over mine, it shifts. The connection turns intimate. His gaze is serious without being distant. For a heartbeat, it feels like it is just the two of us, suspended between worlds.

“Ready?” he asks.

I am not, but I nod.

The crossing feels different tonight. There is no rush like a REAPER mission. No shadowed edges. It flows smoothly and unhurriedly, like drifting down a slow river of light. Time slips.

When we step out, I forget how to breathe.

The Resonance Hall is no longer just a council chamber. It is not simply the building that hosts the yearly rite or the Council meetings. It has become something else entirely.

A palace.

The vaulted ceiling has become a mirrored dome. Thousands of suspended lights hang like stars. Crystal spheres and stained-glass colors shift with the music. The obsidian floor reflects everything, from the sweep of gowns to the hum of airborne magic.

The round walls bear the sigils of the old bloodlines. The Nightmoor crest sits above the main doors, a scythe crossed with a burnt rose in hammered silver. I feel a tremor run through me.

“Villin…”

“I know,” he whispers in my ear. “I promise you will walk in with your head held high.”

I scan the room. Council members are already seated. Counselor White sits composed and unreadable. Kith El’Mara smiles, but it barely touches one corner of his mouth. William Nightmoor isn’t in sight, but I can feel him in the bones of the room, a weight that presses even when invisible.

My pulse kicks up a notch. The tiara presses against my temples. For a moment, the dress feels tight across my ribs, perfect and daring all at once.

Heads turn and the silence falls, sharp and deliberate. Somewhere, a violin skips a note, then finds its place again. Too late. Everyone knows something changed the second I entered.

They are watching me. Not Villin.

The tiara catches the light like a verdict. I stand taller. The silk moves with me, the slit slicing a line that says I do not apologize for my body or my power. Hiding isn’t an option, and I do not.

“She’s doing it on purpose,” a whisper cuts through the air. Cassandra grips her glass like a weapon, muttering under her breath.

“Of course she is,” another voice answers, dry and brittle. “Did you expect a widow’s black?”

Villin tightens his arm at my side. He doesn’t speak for me. He does something better. He gives me the room to speak for myself.

Amias stands across the room, glass tilted, caught between moving toward me and holding himself back. His eyes are loud, all desire and frustration.

Andrei leans into his chair like a statue. His face is neutral, classic Andrei. His hand says more than his mouth ever could, knuckles white against the table. His gaze traces my slit, the tiara, then settles on Villin.

And Elias.

My chest tightens the moment I see him. He's wearing a deep amethyst suit with a crisp white shirt, dark hair pulled back with just enough carelessness to make it deliberate. His eyes are darker than usual, raw in a way that leaves no doubt. He looks at me as if he wants to speak, but the words are caught between want and need, held back by a force I can't name.

"Every step you take is a statement," Villin murmurs in my ear. "You just wrote the first paragraph of a new chapter."

I swallow hard. The hall feels like a theater of judgment, and I am center stage. Not by choice, but because they placed me here. Even with every instinct screaming to run, I stay.

Dozens of eyes follow me. Sons and daughters of old houses, Council members, elites, spies, predators, draped in silk. People who have only ever spoken my name in whispers. People who know exactly what flows in my veins.

An older man in a gold suit lifts his glass. Then another. Then another.

"They will play by our rules," Villin murmurs, low but sharp enough to carry, "as long as we don't let them write their own."

I look at him and realize the pedestal he's placed me on isn't a trophy stand. It's a warning.

He guides me toward the center of the hall, the circle of crystal under the mirrored dome. The first dance waits. Magic ripples beneath my heels as the instruments rise again. There's no sidestep left.

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## ELIAS

We sit in a straight line at the table, the three of us, frozen like statues who have forgotten why they exist. The orchestra hums through its waltz, meant to charm the crowd, but it is a blur of sound. Glass in hand, we fake conversation. Every glance I cast is pulled to the same point.

Her.

Celeste.

Red silk clings to her as if it were woven for fire, alive and daring. That tiara does not shimmer; it commands. A crown, not a decoration.

She is on Villin's arm. The sight hits harder than I expected.

My chest tightens. I told myself I was ready for a version of her that steals the air from the room. I did not expect it to split the part of me still trying to heal. She steps under the mirrored dome, and the whole hall bends to her.

"I can't believe she came with him," Andrei snaps, voice tight, not calm enough to pass for indifferent. His whiskey hovers in his hand, untouched, eyes caught on her mouth and the crown at her temples.

“Why didn’t you see it coming?” I murmur to Andrei, but the question is for Amias, and we both know it. A jab, maybe. Or just the truth. It hurts.

Amias does not respond. He toys with his glass like it is an equation. His eyes follow her the way a man tracks the movement of planets. Not the silk. Not the diamonds. Her face.

“I didn’t see it because I didn’t want to,” Andrei admits, then drains his glass in one swallow.

I look back at her. She is on the floor now. Villin’s hand rests at her waist, a little too familiar, almost claiming. She smiles. I cannot tell if it is real or calculated. Either way, something inside me cracks, a seam that has held for weeks finally giving way.

I was the first to kiss her. I was the one she chose to pull back from the edge. I am not the one who walked her into this hall.

That part is on me. I should have fallen to my knees and thanked her. I should have given her the reverence she deserves. She never asked for it. She handed me back my soul like it was nothing, like returning a life was an errand.

Every night, I ask myself whether what I feel is worship or love. It is real. I will not back away again. I will take her as she is, not the version I want, as long as there is space for me in her heart.

“If you touch him now, you’ll blow us all to hell,” Andrei says, quiet but cutting.

I realize my fist is clenched under the table and force it open.

“I won’t touch him,” I say through my teeth. “I can’t promise a smile.”

Amias exhales. “There it is. None of us can smile anymore, and we still want her. Same room. Same life.”

“We don’t own her,” I remind them.

Silence settles, thick and humming. Light catches the facets of her crown and scatters stars across the obsidian floor. The violinists find the heartbeat of the melody again.

I stop running circles in my head. I want her, not as a savior I owe, but as the woman who brought me back. If I have to earn my place every day, I will. I will not make a scene. I will not strike a match in a room full of powder. I will play the long game, and I will play it honestly.

Tonight I ask her for a dance. I will tell her the truth without turning it into a plea. I will stand beside her, not in front and not behind. I will be a shield when she needs it, air when she needs space. No chains. No ultimatums. Only the promise to show up, to stay, to fight for the life she wants, even if it is not only mine.

Across the room, Villin turns with her. Amias's knuckles are white around his glass. Andrei's jaw ticks once and then stills.

We do not say it aloud. We do not have to.

The game has begun, and none of us is backing down.

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## VILLIN

I pull her close like the air between us might catch fire. Her skin against me, the rise and fall of her breath, the weight of red silk brushing heat onto my chest. The orchestra fades into a blur. What I hear is her heartbeat, hammering against my ribs, matching mine in a way that feels like ownership.

Her body fits me like it was made to, like I've been hunting this exact missing piece my whole life. Every curve, every subtle tilt sets me on fire. The dress is a trap, and I walked right into it. That slit climbs high enough to make a saint sweat. The sweetheart neckline mocks me with cold precision, daring me to keep my hands to myself.

She doesn't know that every look she gives me lights a fuse. Every breath she takes in my arms makes my chest ache and my blood roar. My mouth hovers at her throat, and the wild, floral scent of her rewrites every plan I ever thought I had.

"You wore this on purpose," I growl, moving with the waltz, every step a claim.

She lifts a brow at me. “Maybe. Not for you.”

Her words hit like a punch, but I don’t flinch. She tests me, challenges me, and yet when I draw her close that last inch, she doesn’t pull away. Not entirely.

“In a way, it’s still for me,” I breathe against her ear, low and dangerous.

She presses her hand harder on my shoulder. Around us, whispers thread through the room, sharp as knives wrapped in satin. They see the crown. They see the color. They do not see what I see. Power. Rebellion. A courage that walks into a den of wolves and dares them to bite.

“You look like a queen,” I tell her, voice tight, raw, every word a confession and a threat at once.

The dance slows until the floor belongs to no one but us. “Everyone needs to understand no one will lay a hand on you.”

I feel the weight of her in my arms, the pull of her fire against mine. Maybe this song is a minute, maybe a lifetime. Either way, I will not let her slip through my fingers. Not now. Not after everything I’ve already lost. Not after everything she’s already given me without even knowing it.

I don’t just want her. I need her.

“At the next ball,” I murmur, my mouth just shy of her lower lip, “I’ll be the first to kiss you in public.”

She lets out a quick laugh as the orchestra shifts. It doesn’t sound like a refusal. It sounds like a dare.

The Resonance Hall glows with marble and obsidian, but she is the center, the fire everything bends toward. My hand settles at her waist, red silk warm under my palm. My fingers trace the curve of her back, and together we fall into the rhythm like it was written for us alone.

“You look…” The words choke me before I ruin us with the wrong truth. I swallow hard and give her the only one that feels safe. “You look like this whole room has been blind until tonight.”

“Tell me it’s not too much,” she says, a thin smile tugging at her mouth.

“For them, maybe. For me, it’s perfect.”

Her eyes flicker, then catch mine again. I lean in. Close enough that the world holds its breath. No music. No council. No past. Just the weight of what happens if I close that last inch.

“Excuse me, Villin. May I steal a dance?”

The voice cuts through, steady and certain.

Elias.

I turn my head slowly. My brother knows how to bury fury in courtesy. He knows how hard it is for me to yield. Celeste looks startled, but she doesn’t refuse. Her silence is enough.

I let go, deliberate and slow, my fingers leaving her waist like a secret I don’t want to give away. Elias draws her in and claims the space I carved around her.

I walk off the floor without looking back. The table waits for me. So does the whiskey. Amias sits there, face carved from stone, watching everything and saying nothing.

“You saw,” I say as I pour.

“I felt it,” Amias answers. “Like an earthquake. In the gut. In the brain.”

I drink and don’t care if it’s the third or the fourth. “What comes next, Amias?”

“We decide if we lose, or if we risk everything for her.”

On the floor, Elias holds her by the waist. She laughs at something he says, or maybe she laughs to keep from breaking.

“What has she done to us?” I whisper, low enough that it barely counts as sound.

Amias doesn’t answer. He doesn’t have to.

I leave him at the table and cut across the room toward the council dais. One look at Celeste as I pass. Elias turns her, and it feels like a ritual I no longer own. No matter. There are other fires to tend. She is safe with him.

The council table is a sweep of black obsidian, the sigil glowing faintly beneath the chandelier’s light. Each seat is carved with initials, each chair a small throne. Mine sits between Robert White and Kith El’Mara. Lucky me.

I’ve barely settled before Kith starts, his voice slick and loud enough to carry.

“What are you angling for, Villin? You lead a frightened girl into a hall built for leaders, then parade her like a queen and crown her with a trinket that should bear the weight of a dynasty. That tiara is a cheap costume piece.”

His words spill like poison into crystal. I don’t look his way. I sip my whiskey, feigning indifference.

“Maybe it’s time we redefine *weight*, Kith. Maybe a leader isn’t made of carats and pedigree, but of what’s still standing when everyone else runs.”

“Or maybe,” he says with a reptile’s grin, “this is one more move from a desperate man. Wrap a girl in gold to hide your own weak spots. William won’t tolerate it. You’ll learn that soon.”

That’s a match struck over a powder keg.

Before I can answer, Robert White speaks, voice calm and edged.

“Celeste Nightmoor is not a girl. She is the heir to a bloodline that ties Elmaris to everything we lost and everything we must defend. Villin is not

propping her up. He is preparing her. You must have forgotten what honor looks like, Kith. Some of us chose our sides a little too well.”

Kith goes quiet for one beat longer than his pride can stomach. His eyes lock on mine, and the spark there belongs to a war we have not named yet. Silk and champagne won’t matter when the world goes up in flames.

For now, we can still dance. And we can still decide where to stake our claim.

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## CELESTE

I slip out of Elias’s arms with a smile I hope looks effortless, though a fire still climbs my ribs and refuses to let go.

“I’ll be right back,” I murmur, and I vanish before he can ask why.

The hall gleams with jeweled gowns and tailored suits, every eye hidden behind a polite mask, and I weave through them toward the side corridor. The floor mirrors the chandeliers, but none of it registers. My pulse still races with the rhythm of the dance, caught in the memory of hands at my waist.

The bathroom door closes behind me. I lean on the sink, fingers trembling. The tiara comes off first, set carefully on the counter. I pull my hair forward to let the cold air find the back of my neck and splash water over my throat. Relief does not come.

Their touches are still here, burning under my skin.

Villin’s hand was authority made flesh, controlled heat that marked me, tracing the curve of my waist, drifting lower as if daring anyone else to cross him. His eyes spoke in a way no kiss could, igniting something raw

and untouchable. Elias's touch was unfiltered need, desperate and insistent. His hand landed where Villin's had, maybe lower, the weight of his fingers threaded with every unspoken vow.

I grip the edge of the sink until my knuckles whiten. I cannot let a single dance strip me down like this again.

I set the tiara back on my head. Its cool weight steadies me, not enough to slow my heartbeat, but enough to step forward.

The garden door yields under my hand, and Alaska's air finds me, sharp and clean, a blessing in the frost. My breath ghosts as I step onto stone. The hall fades behind me, lights dim and distant. Out here are frostbitten roses, worn benches, bare branches that claw at the night. Wind threads through them like a quiet hymn. My dress clings with each step, red silk sliding along my thighs. The high slit leaves my leg nearly bare. Gold heels whisper across the frozen flagstones.

I trace the spot where Elias's fingers lingered along my collarbone, then lower, remembering Villin pressing me close. My body cannot decide which memory it wants more. A shiver shoots down my spine, equal parts ache and hunger. I was not ready for how sharply their absence would hit, how hollow it feels when they are gone, or how much it shatters me to be wanted not as a symbol but as a woman.

I stop before a dead tree, its trunk split, branches raking the sky. I tilt my head back and let the cold pour through me, trying to steady the frantic beat in my chest.

The air changes.

A presence slides into the garden, old and heavy, a shadow I cannot shake. Pepper, dry wood, a faint blood-scent.

My heart stops. I turn.

He is there.

Tall and quiet, moving with predatory grace. His coat is the black of obsidian, cutting the breeze. Gloves cover his hands. A high collar hides the knife-edge of his jaw. The face is one I will never unsee.

“You have grown,” he says, voice low, almost warm.

For a heartbeat, my lungs betray me. That voice, those words, ordinary and almost tender, as if a father greets a daughter after years apart.

“William.” The name slips out, bitter and sharp, poison I swallowed long ago.

He tilts his head, the barest smirk curling one corner of his mouth. “That is not the form of address here, Celeste. Father, not William. We are short on ceremony.”

He stops a few paces away, hands light behind his back, posture poised.

“I thought you would run again.” His eyes hold mine, steady, almost curious. “Yet here you are. Fire and blood in silk. It suits you.”

My jaw tightens.

“The dress is lovely.” His gaze glides down and back, a slow inspection. “The tiara surprised me.” He gestures toward my brow, where white gold and diamonds catch the garden light. “Do you find it ridiculous to wear a symbol of a crown you did not earn?”

“I did not ask for it.” I cross my arms and keep my chin high. “I am not handing it back.”

He laughs once, short and practiced, fingers tapping lightly against his coat sleeve. “You enjoy the idea that you chose all this, do you not? That tonight was an act of power. That you walked in like a queen, not a child in borrowed clothes.”

He steps closer, leaving only a silver of space between us.

“You are not leading. You are being led,” he says, his hands dropping to his sides. “Dressed by other hands, posed for applause. Do you think any of them respect you? Do you think Villin protects you?”

“Villin has no power over me.” I keep my shoulders squared.

“Wrong.” His brow lifts. “He has as much as you grant him, like a well-fed hound. This is not about him.”

Another step. His eyes flicker over my face, measuring. “It is not about the men who want you, not about the dress that flatters you. It is about who you are, or rather what you will never be.”

“And what have you decided I am?” I meet his gaze evenly, unflinching.

His eyes narrow as he closes the last inch. “You are of my making,” he says, voice gone bright with fanatic certainty. “Flesh from my blood. Whatever story you tell yourself about independence is temporary.”

“You are not a god.”

He rolls his eyes, sharp and practiced. “No. I was a king. Royal blood is not inherited by wish. It is taken, enforced, and kept by force.”

Rage coils around the fear I thought I had mastered.

“I am not the child who cried and stayed silent,” I say, my voice steady despite the tremor inside.

The smile vanishes. His expression hardens. “No. You are the woman drunk on the idea that you became something other than an extension of my will.”

The mask drops, and suddenly the presence I grew up with feels real, undeniable.

He strikes before I can brace. His hand snaps, and the slap lands clean across my face. The crack drills through my skull. My head whips to the side. I hit my knees on cold stone, breath jerking.

Metal floods my mouth. Blood warms the corner of my lip.

“You dare speak as if you are free.” His teeth grit, eyes bright with belief. “You are the result of a weakness, a mistake I did not repeat.”

I push up, trying to form words, but he is already over me.

His gloved hand clamps down on the tiara and tears it from my head, hair ripping with it.

“You thought this was your sign,” he hisses, every syllable curdled with contempt. “You are not a queen. You are nothing.”

Metal groans as he bends the crown. Diamonds crack and splinter. A slick blackness seeps into the broken gold, thick as tar, drinking the corruption like a living thing.

“This is your reality.”

“Let me go,” I say, but my voice fractures.

He kneels, looming, stripped of every human trace. “I will remind you who you belong to.”

He hammers the jagged tiara into my arm.

I scream.

It’s not fear. It’s pain, fury, and betrayal, all rising from the same center. Skin splits beneath the silver point. Heat pours down my forearm. Blood runs hot, the night air carving my lungs with ice.

The world tilts. Stars explode across my vision.

He rises, gloved hands smeared with my blood. The tiara lies ruined on the stone, crushed and unrecognizable, like a trampled flower.

“You will never be what you think you are.” He turns and folds into the dark with no hurry and no regret, letting the shadow reclaim the light.

Pain throbs through me. My arm burns. Blood blossoms over the red silk, turning tonight’s beauty into something grotesque. I close my eyes. Light

fractures, then dies into shadow.

Just before everything goes black, I understand something no one warned me. Blood can feel cold when it comes from the hand that gave you life.

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## AMIAS

Elias laughs so hard his chair tips, and Andrei goes red, all the way to the tops of his ears. I lean on one elbow, rubbing at my temple, asking myself for the third time how I got stuck between a vampire licking blood off a table and another one roasting him for it.

“It was the last bag, man,” Andrei mutters, low and defensive. “What did you want me to do, toss it? Respect the blood, don’t waste it.”

“Respect it, sure. Lick it off the table, no,” Elias wheezes between laughs. “You even used your tongue, brother. Like a golden retriever with an ancient thirst.”

I try. I swear I try to laugh with them. But something hums under my skin, off and low, like a creak down a long, empty hallway. Nothing feels right.

Then it hits.

Pop.

One dry beat of my heart, and the room shears away. Laughter snaps to silence. Color drains. I am nowhere. No time, no body.

An image slams in.

Celeste.

The red dress looks like an open wound. Her face is too pale. Bare legs twisted on cold stone. A crushed tiara. Blood. So much blood.

A shard of that crown jammed into her arm. Her body tipped on the frost-dark path like a discarded doll.

I can’t see what came before. I can’t see who did it. Only the aftermath. Only the damage.

“Too late,” a voice whispers, one I know. Saeris.

An echo riding my nerves.

“I told you you're a variable. Some constants burn faster than others.”

I pull against it. I try to shout.

“You are tied to her.”

Silence.

“That will destroy you.”

I rip back into myself.

Air hits my lungs like a hammer as I snap back. The room returns in a hard, jarring click. My hands shake. Elias is still half-laughing until he notices my face, and the sound dies mid-breath.

“Amias?”

I don’t answer. Blood roars in my ears. I tear the napkin from my lap, drop it on the table, then stand.

No. It cannot be real.

Maybe it’s a branch of possibility, a path not fixed. But the pain felt real. The image was too clear. She is in danger. Celeste.

“Amias?” Elias is on his feet, panic in his voice. “What is it? What did you see?”

I meet his eyes for a heartbeat, knowing I cannot waste another second.

“Celeste. Blood everywhere. In the garden.”

I raise my hand and focus on the spot from the vision. Power hums, raw and alive, crawling through the air. A portal tears open, jagged and messy, but enough.

I leap.

Toward the garden.

Toward the blood.

Toward her.

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## VILLIN

I drink. Third sip, fourth, maybe the fifth. I stop counting. The whiskey slides down like water, leaving nothing behind. I should feel fog, a blur, something to dull the edges. My blood never lets me forget. It never forgives.

I sit alone in a shadowed corner of the hall. Music floats somewhere distant, pretty and meaningless. The only proof that I still exist is the tap of glass on glass when I set the tumbler down.

Footsteps slam across the floor. Elias.

“Villin. It’s urgent.”

I don’t turn. I take one more swallow. His panic is sharp, contagious.

“It’s Amias,” Elias says, gripping my shoulder. “He had a vision. Celeste. Blood. The garden. He didn’t explain. He opened a portal and jumped.”

Fabric shrieks and tears. My clothes fall in scorched strips across the obsidian floor. I rise like an earthquake. Bones stretch. Skin hardens. Claws punch out. Wings carve the night.

A roar escapes me. Nothing human lingers in it.

Someone touched her.

I don’t need a vision. I don’t need words. I feel it in every nerve. Celeste is in danger.

I launch through the balcony arch. Stained glass shatters. Metal screams. The night swallows me whole. Cold air tears across my stone skin as I drive low over the roofline, skimming the mirrored dome and torchlit ledges. Voices rise behind me, but I don’t hear them. The orchestra is a blur that can’t keep pace.

Instinct is the only compass I have. Her name pounds in my mind.

Celeste.

The garden stretches like a black ocean of lanes and arched ivy. Marble statues stare blankly like witnesses. A place built for ceremony now gapes like a trap. I bank hard and drop. Still no sign.

Then I sense it.

Blood.

Not seen, but smelled, felt, sharp as a lightning strike. I slam onto the wet stone. The ground shudders beneath me. Claws rake and spark. A dark line spreads across the pavers, fresh and glistening.

The scent hits me like a punch to the chest.

Hers.

My heart stops, then detonates. I drive forward, more beast than man, hammering my claws into the garden path. Lights shiver as if they know what I am about to find.

I glimpse the nightmare a heartbeat before it lands.

And then I see her, and my heart stops.

Celeste lies on the cold stone. Her body is twisted the wrong way. Red silk is shredded, sticky with blood. The tiara is crushed. A jag of gold

presses into her left arm. Her face tilts to the side. Lashes still closed. Lips blue. Skin pale as winter frost.

I drop to my knees, and a sound rips from me, raw and ancient, the kind of cry the world would hear if it ever ended.

Celeste.

My claws tremble as I brush her shoulder, trace the curve of her neck. She breathes, shallow and thin, eyes sealed. Her blood is warm. This just happened. Someone did this.

Rage tears through me. Every last scrap of control evaporates. The edges of my vision turn black.

I swear it aloud. I do not whisper. I do not hesitate.

*I am going to kill the one who did this.*

Power rolls through me, heavy and dangerous. I lift her, feeling her weightless against me. Her head falls against my shoulder. The red silk clings, soaked with blood. The shard that was once her tiara sticks like a cruel punctuation.

I remain shifted, wings and talons flexed. There is no returning to what I was. Not now. Not ever.

“Celeste.” My voice grinds out like stone.

A thin sound escapes her throat, faint and broken, and it destroys me all over again.

The air tears. *Vampire speed*.

“Villin?” Elias’ voice cuts from the left.

I don’t look. I don’t answer. My eyes stay fixed on her blood, her wound, her unmoving mouth.

“What happened?” Andrei demands, closing from the other side.

I feel them near. If they take one wrong step, I will break them. Some part of me wants to.

“Where were you?” My teeth are bare as I speak. “Where were you when she fell?”

“Villin.” Elias’ voice trembles now.

“Was it William?” Andrei asks. It sounds like a question, but it lands like a verdict.

Every light inside me burns out except one.

“It was him.”

I need no witness. No proof. Her blood is all the evidence I require.

My grip tightens around her, careful despite the claws. I will not harm her. Not her.

“I am going to kill him.”

“Wait.” Elias moves closer, desperation thick in his voice. “Not like this.”

I twist toward him, teeth bared. Close enough to end him. I hold back, but only barely.

“Do not come near her.”

He freezes. He understands that I am not only myself tonight.

“Is she alive?” Andrei asks.

“I don’t know,” I rasp. “If she doesn’t wake in the next seconds, I will tear down every wall in that hall with my hands.”

A small, broken sound stirs from her lips.

“Celeste. I am here. Stay with me, baby.”

Nothing changes except the way my soul splits open.

Shadows stir, and I turn. Amias kneels farther back, his hands glistening with her blood. He has not spoken until now.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since I jumped,” he answers. “I saw it in a vision. I was not fast enough.”

The ice inside me thaws just enough for Elias and Andrei to edge closer. Just enough for me to see my palms, slick with her blood.

“I am taking her home,” I say. “Then I am going after him.”

Amias steps forward, guilt carved into every line of his face. “Villin. You do not know for sure it was William.”

I look at him, holding his gaze.

“I know. Only a monster does this to his own daughter.”

The portal rips open under my hand. I almost never use it to step straight into my house. Tonight I do.

I carry her across the threshold and into my bed. The silk sheets, the hardwood floor, the blood that will never wash out, none of it matters. Only she matters.

I lay her down like something sacred. For a moment, she looks asleep. Then the wound pulses again. Blood slides from her arm where the crown’s shard still juts. It runs over her skin, down the red dress, across the black linens. Every drop cuts me deeper.

“Hold on, Celeste,” I whisper, bending close. “Hold on to me.”

The door slams open. Amias barrels in first, face wrecked by guilt.

“How is she?” His eyes don’t leave her.

“She is dying,” I answer. “I don’t know what to do.”

Elias fills the doorway next, eyes blazing red, fangs down.

“I can try,” he says quickly. “I completed my Awakening. My blood might stabilize her. I am fully turned.”

“Do it. Now.”

He bites his wrist without hesitation. Thick blood wells. He presses it to her mouth.

“Come on,” he murmurs. “Come on, sweetheart. Take it.”

Nothing.

He tips her jaw and lets the blood slide past her lips. Her throat does not move. She does not swallow.

“Why is it not working?” Elias snaps.

Andrei enters on the last word. His gaze sweeps the room once—Celeste on the bed, Elias bleeding into her mouth, me on my knees, Amias trembling.

“Because her vampiric gene is latent,” Andrei says, calm but grim. “It will not activate without the ritual. Her body does not recognize another vampire’s blood as compatible.”

“So what does that mean?” My voice breaks.

“It means she can’t assimilate it,” Elias answers, stricken. “Her body rejects it. Like a bad transfusion.”

“What do we have left?” The question lands empty, a prayer without faith.

Amias moves closer. His hand trembles as he rests it on her brow. “There is still a pulse. Weak. If it slows any further, her body will shut down.”

“So she can die,” I say flatly. “For real.”

Amias closes his eyes. “If we do nothing in the next few minutes, yes. There will be no coming back.”

I drop beside her and take her hand. It’s ice cold, cruel in its betrayal. I press my mouth to her forehead. I am a man losing the only person who ever pulled me back from myself.

“You do not leave,” I tell her. “You do not leave without a fight.”

She does not answer. Her breath rattles like broken glass.

“If there is a chance,” I say, voice raw, “we take it. I will not lose her.”

“Then we accelerate the ritual,” Amias says, meeting my eyes. “We force it.”

“And if she cannot survive it?”

“Then she dies here in your bed anyway.”

The pain climbs through me like fire under my ribs. I shoot to my feet, pacing once as the bomb inside ticks hotter. I look at her—my queen, whether the world accepts it or not. Now a ghost on black silk, blood on her lips, skin like wax.

If we do nothing, she is gone.

“We need an altar,” Amias says. “A guide. Someone who understands an Awakening for a born hybrid, not a turned one. We need it now.”

I look at the three of them. I look at her. Something breaks clean inside me.

“Get everything ready,” I order. “We do the ritual. If I have to drag her back from death with my claws, I will.”

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## AMIAS

Villin’s bedroom smells of blood, scorched silk, and raw panic that sticks to your throat. The air is heavy, almost solid. Celeste lies across the bed like a candle at its last flicker, fragile and defiant. I cradle her wrist, searching for a pulse, a faint tap that cannot decide whether to fight or give in.

Villin has shifted his form and paces like a caged animal, each footfall on the hardwood a warning. Elias hunches at the edge of the mattress, dried blood dark on his wrist, staring at her like a man facing a debt he cannot pay. Andrei is silent, which is worse. Silence always means he is one breath away from reckless action.

“We are out of time.” My gaze locks on Villin. “Even if we force the ritual, we still need a catalyst. She cannot be bound to blood without a guide, someone who knows how to awaken a born hybrid, not a turned one.”

Villin spins, eyes sharp. “Where am I supposed to find a priest in the middle of the night? I do not keep one under the bed.”

“If we do not, we lose her.” The words cut like a knife, sharp and cold.

The door slams against the wall.

“Move.”

Lys bursts in, skirt torn high for running, glitter streaked with ash. Her hair flies wild, haloed around her pale, determined face. Her eyes land on Celeste, and a low gasp escapes her throat.

“Oh Goddess. Celeste.”

Her hands stay steady as she slides past us, cupping Celeste’s face with a gentleness that could break steel. “Hold on, baby. Please.”

“Lys.” My voice drops, urgent. “We need to push the ritual. Now. If you know anyone who—”

“I brought someone.” Her voice cuts me off, fast and sharp. “Not for this, but if there is a chance, he can help. Caleb.”

Caleb steps into the room as if he had been summoned by her need. He's tall, dressed in a black vest with the collar open, blond hair tied in an imperfect knot. His presence alone dampens the chaos, like cool water poured over hot stone. He kneels at the bed, eyes scanning Celeste, measuring. Something hardens in his jaw, in the set of his shoulders.

“How long has she been bleeding?”

“Twenty minutes. Maybe more.” Failure is sour on my tongue.

“Unconscious?”

“All the way.”

Caleb moves with calm precision. From his pocket, he pulls a small crystal and a ceremonial blade, placing one palm on her forehead, the other on her chest. A soft green-blue light blooms from his hands, steady and quiet, not harsh or invasive.

“Pulse unstable. Aura fractured. The artery in her arm is torn. Her inner magic is locked,” he murmurs.

We all lean in. “What does that mean?”

“It means something inside her is fighting back. An old layer of ancestral magic,” Caleb says. “If I stabilize her, she might survive.”

“Can you?”

He glances at Lys, then at me. “I don’t know. I will try.”

Then he turns to Villin, sharp and steady. “Are you going to let me work, or toss me out of your palace of blood and ego?”

For the first time in twenty minutes, Villin stops. He steps back, muscles coiled but still.

“Do what you have to do,” he warns. “If you hurt her, I will tear you apart with my own hands.”

Caleb nods, sets his palms over her heart, and begins.

Light pools around him. Words slip like wind through a canyon. The magic does not batter, it coaxes, flowing with the faint rhythm of her pulse, a tide that refuses to break. The air hums warmer at the edges, a prayer with a heartbeat. I edge closer and feel the room tilt toward hope.

“If he pulls this off, she lives,” I murmur. “Then we decide whether the ritual even happens.”

Villin nods, still taut as a wire. Elias wipes at his face with his sleeve, tension coiling through him. Andrei gives nothing away, a silent sentinel.

I can feel the crossroads approaching. If she comes back, nothing about our lives will ever be the same.

Caleb moves in a silence that shouts. None of us dares to breathe.

Lys kneels beside Celeste’s head, glitter streaked with tears. Her dress is ruined, her hands steady, palm resting against Celeste’s forehead as if she

could anchor a soul by touch alone.

“I cannot feel her,” she whispers, more to herself than anyone else. “It’s a void. Like she is gone and her body forgot how to live.”

My jaw tightens. I know exactly what she means. Not asleep, not quiet, an emptiness where her presence should be.

Elias paces behind me, more predator than man, shoulders bunched, teeth clenched. His offering failed. His blood did not take. Andrei stands rigid, the kind of stillness that guards tombs. His gaze is fixed on the wound in her arm, the jagged tiara shard buried cruelly in her flesh. A deliberate strike. A sentence. A mark meant to linger.

Villin does not move. He has not spoken since Caleb began. His aura hums like a storm ready to unleash chaos.

Caleb leans closer, face tight with focus. The green-blue thread of light pulses into her, knitting and coaxing her body to answer.

“Ribs cracked,” he murmurs. “Clavicle fractured. Hairline in the jaw. Ankle crushed. Those I can mend.”

“And the rest?” I ask, heart lodged in my throat.

He pauses. His hands hover over her arm and the crown shard. “It nicked an artery. Not a small one. If I don’t seal it perfectly, she could lose function, maybe for good.”

“Can you?” I whisper.

He scans us, Lys, Villin, then me, and his eyes harden. “Silence.”

Two fingers brush the shard. He inhales slowly, and the room holds its breath with him.

A flare of clean white light surges from Caleb’s palms, flowing into her like a tide. Her skin tightens beneath it. The bleeding slows, but the wound remains open, patient and waiting.

Sweat beads at his temples. His fingers tremble over the embedded metal. “It is cursed.” His voice is low, steady with grim focus. “Whoever did this wanted her crippled, or dead.”

Villin’s hand tightens into a fist. “Her father.” The word lands with the weight of iron. Caleb does not answer.

He inhales, eyes on the wound. “Then I have to undo the curse while closing the artery. One slip, and she pays for it.”

A breath hitches in my chest. “You will not.” My gaze pins him in place. “You are here for a reason.”

His eyes lift to mine, raw and alive. “Pray you are right, Seer.”

The hardest part begins.

Light blooms across her skin. Lys presses her nails into the floor, jaw tight, whispering silent prayers. Elias leans against the wall, shoulders bunched, gasping as though he has run a marathon. Andrei’s eyes are closed, calm in the storm, murmuring words to a universe that may not answer.

Caleb shifts his hands, gripping the shard. The curse lashes back, fire biting at his skin, trying to wrench him loose. He grits his teeth and murmurs in a language I do not know. Inch by inch, he pulls.

The shard slides free, and the wound seals.

Caleb collapses onto the floor, chest heaving, hands trembling, finally allowing himself a small, exhausted smile. “Done.”

Celeste’s finger twitches.

Lys lets out a trembling sob. Villin exhales, a deep, shuddering sound, thunder in the stillness of the room.

Celeste’s eyes flutter open. A sliver of brown pierces the pallor. “Amias,” she breathes, or maybe it is the word I need to hear.

I drop to my knees beside her. Pressing a hand to her forehead, then her arm, I whisper, “I am here. You are safe. Do not move. Caleb saved you.”

Her lips part. A word struggles to form, hesitant but deliberate. She is here. Not just a body. Not a shadow. She is present.

Caleb’s hands hover, the shard removed but energy still humming. “If you try the ritual now, you will kill her. Her body cannot handle a transformation yet.”

I glance from him to Villin, Elias, and Andrei. Fingers flexed, shoulders coiled, eyes sharp. “Then we protect her. No matter what it takes.”

Lys keeps her hand over Celeste’s, gripping tight. “Welcome back, baby.”

The room holds its breath. Not with fear, but hope. She survived. Broken, yes, but whole enough to heal.

Villin leans close, eyes hard and dark, every muscle coiled. His fists clench, and I know.

Every drop of blood her father stole will be paid for.

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## CELESTE

The dark wraps around me again, colder this time, heavy and real. My eyes feel sealed with lead. I pry them open, my breath is shallow, and my mouth is dry. Pain pulses at my temples and threads down my left arm. I try to move, and a sharp ache stops me, reminding me I am not whole yet.

The room is familiar and strange all at once. High ceiling, heavy drapes, black-carved wood. Smoke, vanilla, and whiskey hang in the air. Villin is not here.

Only one presence sits in the shadows, almost part of the night itself. My body tenses, and a small sound slips out before I can stop it.

“Celeste?”

His voice is low and hoarse, tired but soft. Elias.

I see him now, elbows braced on his knees, holding that position as if he has for hours. His eyes burn red, not from hunger, but from exhaustion and guilt.

“You’re here,” I murmur, or maybe I only think it.

He rises slowly, careful not to close the distance too fast. “I’m here. I never left. I couldn’t.”

In the dim light, he looks almost spectral. Hollowed cheeks, shirt wrinkled, hair loose. His gaze, which has haunted me before now, cuts through me like fire.

“How long was I out?”

He hesitates for a second. “Almost twenty-four hours. You lost a lot of blood. You were close.”

My heart begins a slow, stubborn beat.

“What happened?”

He exhales and runs a hand through his hair. “Amias had a vision. You were hurt badly. The tiara…”

Pain flares in my arm, and I curl it against my ribs. Elias shifts back a step, careful not to jostle me. He does not want to startle me. He probably does not trust himself either.

“Caleb came,” he says, keeping his voice low. “He stabilized the bleeding and saved your arm. You were right on the edge.”

A shiver crawls up my spine, not from cold, but from the truth of it. Caleb. A REAPER healer, maybe. I will remember his name. I will thank him. That is the least I can do.

I look back at Elias, the man who has kept watch over my still body like a relic. “You did not sleep at all?”

“I couldn’t,” he says plainly, as if it were the only option.

The quiet settles, heavy but not suffocating. Necessary.

“Villin?” I whisper.

“Downstairs,” he replies. “I think he is dismantling his furniture one chair at a time. He blames himself. We all do.”

I try to believe him, but something inside me refuses to settle. How can they carry the weight of what my father did?

A hot sting pulses behind my eyes. I turn toward the window. Night presses against the glass, the stars uncertain in my return. Maybe I only made it halfway back.

“Elias,” I murmur again.

“Yes?”

“Have you been here the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He takes a step closer, then another, stopping just beside the bed without touching me. “Because you chose me. At the ball, for a few seconds before everything fell apart, you looked at me and I knew. Once you know, you cannot run. Not even when everything is falling apart.”

My eyes fill with unshed tears without warning. When I say his name again, my voice is shaking.

“Elias.”

He bows his head slightly, as if my voice carries weight enough to pull him down. His hand hovers, then stops halfway. “May I touch your hand?”

I lift my fingers toward him. No words pass between us, but the gesture is enough.

He exhales as if coming up from underwater. His warm palm settles over mine, carrying both guilt and reverence. He strokes my wrist lightly, careful not to press where it would hurt.

“I need a shower,” I whisper. “Or a bath. I can feel the blood on me. I cannot stand it.”

It is not just about cleaning. Panic hums beneath the words. The horror feels pressed into my skin.

“I will help if you let me.”

I nod slightly. That is all it takes.

He moves with the patience of someone shaped by pain. Every step is deliberate, controlled. I let him lift me, feeling the tremor in his muscles through my own. Tension, fear, a quiet hunger he will not feed. I rest my head against his shoulder, eyes open and clear.

He carries me through a side door into Villin’s bath. The room is grand and quiet, stone and glass surrounding a deep marble tub that seems to have been waiting for me. The candles are unlit, the light soft and low. Vanilla and him linger in the air. Villin’s presence is woven into the shadows and carved wood, a silent witness.

Elias lowers me to the edge of the tub with careful precision. He keeps his distance but does not look away. “I can get you clothes, or I can stay and hold you. Whatever you need.”

“Stay,” I whisper.

He pauses as if he forgot how to breathe, then steps closer. “How do you want to do this?”

“Rip the dress.”

Understanding flashes in his eyes. The silk clings to dried blood and bruises, and pulling it off roughly would undo all Caleb just saved.

“Yes,” he says softly, gathering himself. “Do you trust me?”

I catch his wrist and nod. “Always.”

He kneels, biting his lower lip, and lifts the top edge of the silk with gentle hands. A hidden claw slices from the neckline to the hem. The gown parts with a soft sigh and falls away like a memory I no longer own.

What remains is torn fabric, skin streaked with blood, bruises in shades of purple and yellow-green. He does not look at me with hunger. His expression is wrecked, furious, and impossibly tender at the same time.

“You are covered in marks that never should have touched you,” he murmurs to the floor. “It hurts worse than I can say.”

“I know.”

No more words are needed.

He turns the taps. Water flows into the tub with the sound of a quiet spring. Steam rises, carrying the scent of lavender, myrrh, and a hint of mint, a calm that feels alive.

Elias removes his shirt, leaving a thin undershirt and black pants. He does not strip further and does not need to.

Step by step, he guides me into the water. Every movement is measured. Each slight wince is met with patience. He cradles my back and supports my legs, and when I sink fully, the heat closes around me like a steady hand I can trust.

A soft sigh escapes me.

He braces his palms on the tub rim, close but not touching. “Do you want me to wash your hair?”

I close my eyes and realize I am crying only when the tears vanish into the steam. “Please.”

He fills a pitcher and lets the water cascade over my hair. His fingers move through the tangles with care. The shampoo smells of black tea and jasmine. When he finds snarls, he does not pull. He massages, rinses, repeats, and finishes with conditioner. Every knot is untangled, every motion deliberate and reverent.

His hands feel sacred, not just on my hair but on all of me. Everything I am, despite everything I have lost.

“Elias?”

“Mhm?” he murmurs, focused.

“I feel dirty. Not just on my skin. Inside.”

He pauses for a moment, then continues with the same steady rhythm, a private dance between us. “You are light. Even in the dark.”

The words cut deeper than any blade.

He washes my face and rinses my throat. He simply stays, not rushing me, not taking advantage.

“When I am ready, I want to see everyone,” I whisper.

He nods, though a darker shadow flickers in his eyes for a moment. “I will send them. If you need me to stay, I will.”

I lace my wet, shaking fingers around his. “Stay. A little longer.”

He stays.

He drains the bath, then fills it again with warm water. I sink in and let the heat wrap around me, the steam blurring the edges of the room. For a few minutes, I float in the lie of perfect peace. When he offers a thick towel, his hands stay careful, careful not to touch more than necessary.

I feel reborn, not gently, but as if something ripped me from one world and charged me for it. Now I have to figure out how to wear my own skin again.

“I have it from here,” I say, my voice rough but steadier.

He hesitates, then nods. “I will be just outside.”

The door closes softly.

I stand in the marble quiet, wrapped in a heavy black towel. The room is elegant, familiar, and foreign all at once. A round mirror hangs on the wall,

waiting. I stall, knowing exactly what I will see. I lift my hand and wipe away the last haze of steam.

For a heartbeat, the woman looking back is unrecognizable. Pale, drawn, a split lip. Shadows bruise the hollows beneath my eyes. A fresh slash cuts across my neck in a rough diagonal, and a raised red scar on my arm marks where the crown was driven in.

My fingers tremble as I touch it.

Something inside me wants to cry, but the well is dry.

I inhale, tight and off-center. “You are not dead,” I tell myself. *I am not fully alive either, not yet.*

I open the dressing door. His clothes hang in a line, perfect and black. I skim my fingers across wool and linen until I find something neutral, warm, something that feels like nothing at all. A long black shirt with silver buttons that reaches my knees. It is too big and smells like him, like burned wood, vanilla, and the whiskey that lingers in everything he owns.

I twist my wet hair into a messy knot and step out.

I do not expect anyone.

I definitely do not expect everyone.

Their presence hits before I see them, pressing against the air like a storm. I cross the threshold and stop.

Every head turns.

Villin is by the window, half-turned, neck bent toward me, eyes hard as granite. Elias waits near a chair, fists tight. Andrei leans against the wall, gaze low, then lifts it slowly, measuring. Amias sits like a drawn bow, every muscle coiled. Lys kneels by the bed, hand resting on the black sheets stained with my blood, eyes so red it tears at me.

I do not even want to know how the storm inside her chest compares to theirs.

No one speaks.

My knees soften for a moment, not from shame or embarrassment, but from the weight of it all. I came back from the dead, dragging them along with me.

“I am sorry,” I say, voice low. “For scaring you.”

Lys is first. She rises and steps to me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. I let her. I don’t have the energy to resist, and I don’t want to.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she whispers. “You are here. That is what matters.”

I touch the small of her back and wonder if it’s true.

When she lets go, I brace a hand on the mattress. I look at the bed, then at all of them.

“What happened?” I ask. “The real version. I need to know.”

Villin steps forward, hesitates, and stops as if afraid he is too much. Elias meets my gaze, guilt and relief mixing in his eyes. Andrei blinks slowly, the way he measures everything, reading the tilt of my voice. Amias rises with deliberate care, his posture taut, ready.

“I had a vision,” Amias begins, his voice low, almost swallowed by the quiet around us. “It was not complete. I saw you falling with the tiara driven into your arm. Blood everywhere.”

I swallow, feeling that part of it again, the memory or the dream I had carried with me.

“I did not make it in time,” he continues. “None of us did.”

I turn to Villin. His eyes are stone and iron, holding a weight that feels heavier than the world itself. It is as if he were there a breath before I fell,

already losing me once and refusing to let it happen again.

“Your father.” His voice is calm but edged with certainty. “It was him. I know it. Not just because I felt it. No one else would do this.”

His gaze slides to my arm beneath the cuff of my shirt. Everyone is thinking the same thing, the shard driven in like a sentence carved into my skin.

“He broke you on purpose. Not as a father. As a judge.”

I falter, and Elias steps forward, shoulders tensed, but I raise a hand and he holds himself back.

“He wanted to destroy me.”

“The tiara he used was cursed before it even touched you.” Villin’s eyes stay locked on mine. “Everything was balanced on a knife’s edge. We could not save you, Celeste. The only option left was to force the ritual.”

The air vanishes from my lungs. This is not simply a wound. It is a betrayal I always feared and hoped would never become real.

“I was saved…”

“By Caleb.” Lys kneels slightly, pressing a hand to the bed. “Healer. He came to surprise me at the ball. He stabilized you. You were on the edge.”

I glance down at my arm. It throbs, alive and mine, a reminder that I am still here.

“And the ritual,” I whisper, tongue brushing my teeth, searching for fangs I do not feel, “you did not do it, right?”

“No. It was far too soon. It would have killed what remained of you.” Villin’s expression is unreadable, but his eyes hold fire and concern.

A quiet settles over the room, heavy and clear.

They all look at me, not with pity, not with fear, but with something sharper, waiting, measuring.

Something inside me clicks. I understand now that everything has shifted. Another part of me welcomes the change.

I meet their eyes one by one. “Good. Then the next time someone tries to kill me…”

I lift my chin, letting my resolve carry through. “I make sure they do not walk away.”

No one smiles, yet the silence is full of understanding.

We all know that I mean it. *Finally, I mean it.*

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## VILLIN

Drinking feels like the only thing my hands remember. Whiskey slides down my throat without hesitation, a promise I keep breaking, yet I never get drunk. My cursed blood, tangled with old power, burns it away faster than I can burn through my shame. If I were human, I'd already be on the floor. Perhaps that would be easier.

But I remain upright, perched in the darkest corner of the salon, the bottle open, silence the only company that will stay.

William is gone.

True to the cowardice that defines him, he used one of the Council's transport crystals, rare stones shaped by ancient magic. Each is catalogued, controlled, and permitted only to the so-called worthy. William has more than permission. He has the kind of power that lets him run without consequence. That will not last.

Not everyone can do what I do. Portal-walking is rare, both a gift and a curse. My father passed it down to me, though even he never mastered it as I have. For most, it is impossible, unstable, and dangerous.

Yet Amias created one. It shook at the seams, but it worked. A Seer reshaping matter is an anomaly I cannot ignore.

I tip my head back and stare at the carved ceiling. The house is still. The air holds no sound. Saint Villin, commander, gargoyle, noble-blooded monster, reduced to a man who could not protect the only thing that mattered.

Celeste.

Even thinking her name tightens my jaw. I see her body in the garden, the dress spread like a wound, the tiara shattered at her side. William dared. He touched her. He struck her. He drove the tiara into her flesh as if it were a warning.

My hands tremble. I set the glass down before I shatter it. The table could split in half beneath me; I've already splintered too many nights with my own unrest.

The corridors beyond are quiet. Caleb is likely asleep. Lys has not left his side. Elias is probably in her room, playing the loyal guardian. And Amias—he began it all, with his vision, with that connection only he understands. Andrei has withdrawn once more, keeping his distance.

The truth cuts me open. It was not me who felt her first. I was not there. And when her eyes opened, the name she spoke was his, not mine.

I drain the glass in a single swallow, then throw it into the fire. Flames flare over the shards.

There is no reason left in me tonight. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps after I find William and make him regret every mark he left behind. A tyrant has no right to rule us.

The glass cracks in the fire, sparks leaping like they recognize my fury. For a breath, I wonder what would happen if I walked into the flames

myself. If I burned and emerged changed, or never emerged at all.

The thought dies when I hear footsteps.

They are not Amias's. Not Elias's. Not Lys's. The steps are bare, careful on the cold wood. I know before I see. I feel it first.

Celeste.

I turn sharply. She stands in the doorway, wearing one of my shirts. It hangs loose, slipping from her shoulder. Her hair is tied in a careless knot. Her skin is pale, but her eyes are sharp, clear, unflinching. They see through me with no effort.

She freezes when our gazes meet. Her eyes flick to the broken glass in the fire before returning to me. She says nothing.

"What are you doing here?" My voice is low.

"I heard something. I thought maybe someone needed to be heard." Her words strike harder than any blade. I wish I had not heard them.

"You should be in bed. Caleb said you need to rest."

"I could not sleep. It's too quiet." She hesitates, softer now. "And I knew you were not well."

She steps inside. The limp in her walk is slight, but I see it. She cradles her left arm, though she tries to make it look natural. Her body, the body that fought death, is still pretending not to feel.

"Sit." It isn't a command so much as a plea.

She sinks onto the sofa, and I slide back into my chair. The fire crackles between us, shadows flickering across the walls, holding the silence we can't speak through. Warmth brushes my skin, mingling with the tension coiled in my chest.

"Villin… what happened to him? To William?"

I rake a hand through my hair, strands sticking damp with sweat. I swallow, forcing the edge from my voice. “He left right after. Triggered a Council transport crystal. One of the large ones. No one could stop him. There was no time.”

She closes her eyes briefly, and the soft rise and fall of her chest steadies me. “He always does. Strikes, then vanishes. No trace. No shame.”

The quiet presses around us, thick and suffocating.

“I swore I would protect you,” I say, rough with remembered panic. “No one would ever hurt you while I stood near. And still I failed.”

“It is not your fault,” she cuts in, firm yet gentle.

“It is. I was too busy watching you dance, lost in the feel of your skin beneath my hand. I forgot why we were there. I forgot that the man who made you is the same man who would destroy you. I was not there, Celeste.”

Her hands lift, trembling, small against my face, anchoring me. “If you had not been there, I would not be here,” she whispers.

The words hit like fire through ice.

“You carried me home. You saved me. You and the others, yes—but you were the first line. Do not say you failed. Do not say it is your fault. Because then I no longer know what is real.”

I push to my feet, the chair scraping across the floor. She doesn’t flinch. The smell of smoke and burnt whiskey curls around us.

“You don’t need to protect me. Or comfort me. Not when you are the one who bled in that garden.”

“But I can,” she says softly, voice quivering, “because I know how it feels to be useless.”

We stand here, two shadows hollowed by grief, two hearts still bleeding, two bodies drawn together by something stronger than fear. Between us, an unspoken oath pulses like a third heartbeat.

“I will not leave again,” she murmurs. “No matter what comes. No matter what William does. I will not leave.”

She is here. Alive. Scarred, but unbroken.

I cannot keep her at a distance anymore, not after I learned how close I came to losing her.

“Come closer,” I whisper, rough with need.

She steps forward, fearless as ever. I take her hand and draw her against me, and our lips meet. The kiss is raw, greedy, a fire that has been smoldering too long. My fingers thread through the knot of her hair, the scent of her rising like smoke. My other hand settles at her hip, and she sighs, soft, trembling, melting into me. Her skin is warm under my hands, and it ignites everything inside me.

“Say it,” I rasp, teeth grazing hers. “Say you are still mine.”

“There has never been a moment when I was not yours.”

Her words cut through me, shattering and igniting all at once. I feel her heartbeat against mine, her fire, and I burn.

She trembles when I pull her closer, but the flame inside her hasn’t died. It flickers, waiting for me to coax it back into roaring heat. Her body leans into mine, soft yet marked, still healing, still carrying the fight she survived. I have never wanted anything more.

I brush a strand of hair from her cheek. “You are too quiet,” I murmur. “Talk to me.”

Celeste lifts her chin, lips parted, breath uneven. “I want you to touch me,” she whispers. “Like before. Like in the kitchen. But more.”

Heat surges. I ache at the sound of her voice.

I frame her face with my hands and kiss her like I am starving. My tongue pushes past her lips, claiming her mouth with a hunger I can no longer temper. She moans into me, desperate, and a feral sound tears out of my chest.

She tastes like warmth, like power, like something I cannot let go.

Without a word, I lift her by the thighs and press her against the wall beside the fireplace. Her body wraps around me perfectly, as if it was always meant to fit this way. My hands grip her ass, spreading her open, grinding her against the hard line of my cock through my pants.

“You are dripping,” I growl into her throat. “And I've barely touched you.”

“I told you I wanted more,” she gasps.

My mouth curves into a dark grin. “Then stay still and take it.”

I set her down gently, but only for a moment. Then I sink to my knees before her. My palms push her thighs apart, and I hook one leg over my shoulder.

The sight of her soaked pussy nearly undoes me, slick and shining in the low light, her arousal undeniable proof she was waiting for this, aching for it. I don’t waste time. No teasing, no hesitation. My mouth claims her, tongue thrusting deep, hungry, relentless, while my thumb grinds circles over her clit with merciless precision.

Celeste arches against the wall, hips grinding into my face.

“Villin—fuck—”

“I want every sound you denied me in that kitchen,” I growl against her. “Let them hear who makes you come.”

She whimpers, then surrenders.

I seal my lips around her clit and suck hard, my fingers driving into her in a relentless rhythm, curling until I find the spot that makes her break. She cries out my name like a prayer laced with sin.

Her thighs tremble. Her hands claw at my hair. When she comes, it's violent, her release flooding my mouth, my wrist slick with her. I don't stop. I drink her down, pulling every shudder from her body until she slumps, undone.

Only then do I rise.

I pin her to the wall once more, one hand cradling her jaw, my lips brushing hers. "You are mine, Celeste," I whisper, voice shredded with want. "I will fight for you. I will protect you. But when I touch you, you break for me."

She doesn't answer with words. She kisses me instead, deep and claiming, her hand sliding down to my belt. Her fingers tremble as they brush the buckle, and I let her feel what she's done to me.

When she tugs at it, I catch her hand and lean toward her ear.

"Not here."

I kiss her temple, slow and deliberate. "I want you in my bed, where you'll scream for me and then fall asleep in my arms."

She shudders, teeth grazing my neck. "Yes, Villin."

I scoop her into my arms, this time without struggle, and carry her down the silent hallway. The firelight follows us in flickers along the stone walls. She curls against me, lips brushing my jaw.

Pushing open the door to my room with my shoulder, I lay her across the black silk sheets. She sprawls there like sin, and every part of me aches with hunger.

"Stay," I murmur.

I move to the drawers and take out what I need: leather cuffs, silk rope, and a small vial of oil I keep for rare nights like this.

When I return, she is waiting. Knees parted, lips swollen from my kiss, her body flushed from the orgasm I ripped from her. And her eyes burn with the knowledge that I would burn the world if she asked.

My voice drops to a murmur as I crawl over her. “I want to see how long I can keep you on the edge before you break. Shall we find out?”

She nods, breathless. “I will do anything you want.”

“No, baby,” I whisper, fastening the cuffs around her wrists and raising them with care above her head. “Tonight, you will do nothing. You will just take it.”

She gasps when the cold leather touches her skin. I kiss her collarbone, her chest, each bruise and mark that tells the story of what she survived.

“I see every part of you,” I murmur against her stomach. “And I want all of it.”

Her moan is soft, pleading. “Please, Villin…”

“Shh.”

I part her thighs wide and drape the silk rope across them. My mouth hovers just above her skin. “I’m going to make you come again. And again. You’ll beg, and I might refuse. Or I might give permission only to stop the moment you fall apart.”

“Yes,” she breathes. “Yes. Please.”

So I begin.

I start slowly, tasting her, teasing her clit with the flat of my tongue before slipping two fingers inside. I curl them until her breath catches and her back bows off the bed. Every time her body starts to stutter toward release, I pull away, letting her drop back into aching need.

The first time I stop, she gasps in frustration. The second time, her cry is sharper, desperate. The third time she whimpers my name, pleading, and still I deny her.

Her eyes are covered now. The blindfold keeps her in darkness while I whisper filth into her ear. I drag ice over her nipples, watch her shiver, then chase the cold away with my tongue. I mark her skin with my teeth, savoring every sound she makes. I let her grind against my thigh, but when she begs for more, I still refuse.

“You will come when I say,” I whisper against her throat. My hand curls lightly around her neck, reminding her of the control I hold. “Until then, you are mine to unravel, my beautiful mess.”

Her body trembles under me, but she arches into every touch. She loves it. I have never been harder in my life.

Time blurs. The longer I keep her on the edge, the more undone she becomes. By the time I return to her clit with slow, deliberate circles, her entire body shakes. Sweat slicks her skin; the sheets are damp with heat and desire. Her hands strain against the cuffs as if she could tear free just to pull me closer.

When I stop again, she sobs. Her voice breaks. “Please, Villin, I need it, I cannot—”

“Yes, you can.” I drag my mouth along her stomach, up her ribcage, to her lips. “You can take every second I give you. You can endure it because you are strong. *You are mine.*”

Her hips writhe, chasing contact, desperate for more. I pin them down with my hands and grind my tongue against her clit until she is weeping with need. I kiss her hard, swallow her broken cries, and still keep her balanced at the edge, trembling but never falling.

Her whole body is raw with sensation, each nerve awake. She moans with every kiss, shudders at the brush of my lips against her thighs, and arches helplessly when I stroke the reddened skin at her wrists.

“Let me come,” she begs, voice hoarse. “I will do anything. Anything, Villin.”

I cradle her cheek, brushing my thumb across her damp skin. “Do you think you’ve earned it?”

“Yes,” she gasps. “Please.”

My mouth crashes against hers. This time I don’t stop.

I slide my fingers inside her pussy, press my thumb to her clit, and murmur against her lips, “Now.”

She shatters. Her back bows, a scream tearing from her throat as she comes apart in my arms. Her entire body convulses, her release soaking my hand, her cries echoing into my mouth.

I hold her through every wave, every sob, every broken gasp, until she collapses limp against me.

Carefully, I ease the cuffs from her wrists and strip away the blindfold. I kiss her closed eyes, her temples, her damp hair. “Are you all right?” I whisper.

She nods, voice barely audible. “Perfect.”

I gather her into my arms, carry her to the bathroom, and wash her with patient hands. I wrap her in a fresh shirt—mine again—then pull her into bed. She curls against me, tracing the old scars across my ribs with slow fingers. Her breathing steadies.

“Was it too much?” I ask quietly.

“No.” Her answer is rough but certain. “It was everything.”

I kiss her forehead and let her sink into sleep, her body warm and loose against mine.

Tomorrow there will be war. Tonight, she belongs to me completely. And goddess help the man who tries to take her again.

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## CELESTE

I wake to heat. Not the kind from twisted silk sheets or heavy blankets tangled around my legs, but from him. Villin. He lies behind me, chest pressed to my spine, one arm draped heavy across my waist as though he claimed me in the night and never intended to let go. His breathing is deep, steady. Still asleep. Still here.

Goddess. That is new.

The pillow smells of him, vanilla and whiskey. My body remembers his hands, the imprint of his mouth on the softest parts of me, the bite marks along my throat. The ache between my thighs reminds me how long he kept me on the edge until I forgot everything but his voice.

I don’t remember falling asleep. Only the way he held me after, silent and firm, one hand tangled in my hair, the other spread wide across my hip like a warning to the world. *Mine*.

When I shift, his grip tightens even in sleep. Possessive. Protective. It sends a flutter low in my stomach, heat mixed with instinct, maybe even something dangerously close to affection. No. More than that.

*I feel safe with him.*

That should terrify me, but it doesn't. I exhale and guide his hand tighter against me, threading our fingers across my stomach.

This could become a habit.

Waking in Villin's bed. In his arms.

Marked by his mouth. Claimed by his temper. Calmed by his presence.

But it's not just about him.

I remember Elias, his voice soft in the bath, his hands gentle as he washed the blood from my skin as if I were sacred. The quiet strength with which he carried me. The way he asked permission with his eyes before every touch.

I remember Amias, too, appearing in the moment I needed him most. A vision before the fall. A Seer who saw me not as prophecy or power, but as myself. He came anyway.

There is a space in my chest wide enough for more than one kind of love, and it expands now, pulsing steady with every breath I take in Villin's arms.

But Andrei…he is not here yet. Not like the others. His presence is sharp and quiet, always watching, like a blade sheathed at my side. Not trusted. Not drawn. Waiting. He has not earned his place. Not yet.

Villin shifts behind me, his nose trailing the back of my neck. His breath rasps hot against my skin, and a dark, guttural sound rumbles out of him.

I close my eyes. My body is sore in the best way, my muscles stretched and used, claimed. There is a lazy pulse between my legs, a reminder of how long he held me on the edge last night, of how many times I begged, of how often he refused, whispering that he would give me everything only when he chose.

I should feel humiliated. I should feel overwhelmed. I do not.

I glance over my shoulder. He is still asleep, lashes dark against his skin, jaw slack, lips parted. Even like this, there is tension in him, a storm coiled beneath the surface. A man built for war, who gave me tenderness wrapped in fire. He stayed.

I let my head sink back into the pillow and close my eyes.

His hand twitches against my waist. A quiet groan vibrates in his throat. His breath drags slower across my neck, heat stirring between us again. Perhaps it never stopped.

I press back against him, slow enough to feel the thick, hard length of him against me through his boxers.

Another growl escapes him, deeper now, half awake.

“Celeste,” he rasps, my name broken on his tongue.

I don’t answer. I roll to face him, letting the sheet fall from my chest.

His eyes blink open, bleary, then sharp. They find my mouth, then the way I look at him as if I want to taste him.

He parts his lips, but I move first. I push the covers aside and slide down between his legs without a word. The moment my hands hook into the waistband of his boxers, his gaze darkens.

“Celeste,” he warns, more awake now. “What are you—”

“Let me.” My voice is soft but steady. “I want to.”

I do not give him time to argue. I need this. To feel him unravel as he always does to me. To claim a little control back. To give him something that is mine alone to give.

I tug his boxers down, and his cock springs free, thick and hard, already wet at the tip.

He looks at me as though I am divine, as though one touch will detonate him. Yet he doesn’t stop me.

I wrap my hand around the base. He twitches in my palm and growls low.

“You don’t have to—fuck.” His head tips back against the pillow when I lean forward to lick the bead of precum from the tip.

I hum at the taste. Salty, sharp, undeniably his. I flatten my tongue and drag it down the underside, savoring the thick vein pulsing beneath my mouth. His breath stutters. His hands clutch the sheets.

He is trying not to move. Not to buck. Not to lose control. *Good.*

I take him between my lips, sucking gently while stroking the length I cannot fit. His groan is ragged, torn from deep in his chest.

“Fuck, Celeste,” he hisses. “You’re going to kill me.”

I pull back slightly, meet his eyes, then sink lower until his cock hits the back of my throat. I gag around him, but I want to watch him break.

His wild gaze locks on me. His jaw tightens like he is fighting to stay still.

“You don’t know what you are doing to me,” he says, voice rough and ruined.

I smile around him, taking him deeper, and his hips jerk, instinctive and desperate. My moan vibrates over him, and he curses, gripping the sheets so hard it feels like they might tear. His control is slipping.

“Goddess, your mouth,” he snarls. “You’re perfect. Made for this. For me.”

I swirl my tongue around the head, then push lower until my throat protests. I gag again, but I don’t stop. His groan is worth it.

“Celeste,” he warns, teeth bared. “I’m going to—”

I stroke him harder, suck him deeper, refusing to let go.

He shouts when he comes, his body bowing from the bed, one hand flying up to crush the headboard as his release fills my mouth. I swallow every drop.

He pants through it, eyes wild, staring at me as though I cracked him open.

I crawl back up slowly, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. His gaze follows me, dark and dazed.

“Saeris’s bloody wings,” he breathes, dragging me into his lap. “Where did you come from?”

I press a kiss to his jaw. “I was always right here.”

He cradles my face in his hands and kisses me, his lips and voice rough with need. “And you still don’t know what you do to me.”

But I am beginning to. And goddess help us both, I am not done yet.

His chest rises unevenly against mine, his arm tight around my waist like he cannot risk letting go. I press my face to his throat and breathe him in. Sweat, heat, whiskey.

He kisses my temple. “Come with me.”

I blink. “Where?”

“Shower.” His gaze softens. “You have done enough for me. Now let me take care of you.”

Something in his tone makes my chest ache. He is offering more than warmth and water. I nod.

He lifts me easily, carrying me as if I were weightless. His touch is unhurried now, reverent, one hand steady at the back of my thigh, the other drawing circles along my spine.

The en suite is already warm. He sets me on the marble floor, keeps one hand on my waist while turning on the water. The rainfall shower hisses to life, steam filling the room.

He steps in first and offers his hand.

His gaze drifts over me. Not hungry. Not possessive. Like he is memorizing me.

The water pours over us as he pulls me close, burying his face in my hair as though he can wash away something he cannot name.

“I should have seen it coming,” he murmurs against my temple.

“You didn’t fail me,” I whisper.

“You were broken and bleeding,” he answers, his voice breaking. “And I was not there.”

I press my palm to his chest, over his heartbeat. “You came.”

He doesn’t reply. He only cups my jaw and kisses me.

It’s deep, slow, and desperate. His tongue moves against mine like a promise, his thumb brushing the fading bruises along my throat.

When he pulls away, he rests his forehead against mine. “Let me help you.”

He lathers soap in his hands and starts with my shoulders, drawing slow circles across my skin. His touch is steady, cataloging every scratch and mark, learning the new map of me.

He works down my chest, my stomach, pausing at my arm. His fingers brush the scar left by the tiara.

“I will never forgive him for this,” he whispers.

I close my eyes.

He kneels, washing my thighs, the backs of my knees, turning me gently to rinse us both clean. His hands never leave me, not for a moment.

When he stands again, we are soaked and silent. He tilts my chin and searches my face. “Still with me?”

I nod.

“Good.” His voice lowers, rough with something I can feel in my bones. “Because I am not letting you walk through hell alone again.”

He kisses me once more, slower this time.

When we step out of the shower, wrapped in towels and heavy air, I realize the truth that terrifies me most.

This is not only protection. It’s not only guilt.

It’s him. Choosing me.

And I am already his.

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## CELESTE

The house is quiet as we descend the stairs, wrapped in fresh clothes and silence that feels too full to break. Villin's hand lingers low at my back, as though he is still afraid I will vanish if he lets go. I don't pull away.

The moment we step into the kitchen, every head turns.

Andrei leans against the far counter, arms crossed, eyes sharp. Elias stands near the window, hands clasped behind him, as if he has been pacing. Lys and Amias sit at the long oak table, both half-turned toward the door as if they were listening for the first sound of movement upstairs. Caleb is at the sink, sleeves rolled to his elbows, rinsing a mug with practiced calm that fools no one.

Tension spikes, then cracks as Lys rises quickly to her feet.

"She's awake," she breathes. "Thank the goddess."

Elias is the first to move. His eyes sweep over me, searching for cracks, for the fragility of the girl who nearly bled out in his arms. He doesn't speak. He just pulls me into him, and I let him.

His embrace is careful but unyielding, as if he fears both hurting me and what it would mean to let me go. I press my face into his shoulder and breathe him in, all warmth and strength, like sunlight sinking into skin.

“I’m okay,” I whisper. “I promise.”

His jaw hardens. “You shouldn’t have to be.”

When he steps back, my gaze drifts to Caleb. He still stands at the sink, giving me space, yet I can feel the weight of his attention. He carries himself with quiet dignity, never asking for thanks.

I move toward him anyway. The others fade from view as I stop at his side.

“You saved my life,” I say softly. “And I don’t mean that lightly.”

Caleb blinks, then dries his hands with a dishrag before turning to me. “I only did my job,” he answers. His voice is warm.

“No,” I insist, shaking my head. “You did more. You came when we needed you. You stayed. You pulled a curse out of me with your own hands. That’s not just a job.”

A flicker passes over his face, something like relief or maybe something deeper. He inclines his head. “Then I’m glad I could help.”

Before I can think better of it, I step forward and embrace him.

He goes still for a beat, then exhales and returns the gesture. Gentle. Respectful. Not desire, not tension, but solidarity. Sacred in its simplicity, the way people hold one another after surviving something ugly.

When I step back, Caleb offers a faint smile. “You’ve got a stubborn heart.”

“You have no idea.”

Behind me, Amias chuckles quietly. “I think we’re all starting to realize it.”

Lys squeezes my shoulder. “I’ll give you space. But I’m a scream away if you need me.”

She glances at Caleb, who nods once to the room. “Get some rest. She’s stable now, but don’t push it.”

Together, they leave. The door clicks shut behind them.

Andrei remains in the corner, his gaze unreadable. Elias leans against the counter, posture taut, eyes flicking between me and Villin as if weighing which of us is closer to breaking. Amias sits too still at the table, hands clasped, expression stripped of his usual calm. Villin stands at my side, his presence like a storm deciding whether to shield or destroy.

I clear my throat. “Well, this isn’t awkward at all.”

Elias lets out a short laugh. Amias cracks a faint smile. Even Villin’s mouth curves slightly. Only Andrei remains unmoved.

He steps forward, his eyes locked on mine. “You *almost* died.”

The words land like a physical blow despite the flatness of his tone.

“I know.”

“You fought him alone. You didn’t call for help. You didn’t wait.”

“There was no time—”

“There’s always time to survive.” His voice drops. “You should have taken it. You should have run.”

Beside me, Villin stiffens, a low growl building in his chest. Elias straightens, the tension in his shoulders coiled as though ready to step in. Amias stays silent, but his focus sharpens, his stillness cutting deeper than words.

“I did take it,” I snap, lifting my chin. “I’m standing here, aren’t I?”

Andrei’s gaze flicks to the scar on my arm. “Barely.”

Heat surges through me. “If you’re trying to shame me for not dying quietly, you’re wasting your breath.”

His expression doesn’t shift, but the air between us softens into something more raw. Less anger, more fear. Not fear of me, but of what it would have meant to lose me.

“I’m not angry that you lived,” he says finally, the words cutting in their simplicity. “I’m angry that you didn’t trust us to help you live.”

My heart skips a beat.

“It happened too fast,” I admit, my voice quieter now. “He was already there. And William isn’t the kind of man you plan ahead for.”

Andrei dips his head in one short nod, then falls silent.

Elias speaks instead. “We need to talk about what comes next.”

“Like hell,” Villin mutters. “She needs rest.”

“I’m not made of glass,” I bite out.

“No,” Elias answers calmly, “you’re not. But next time William comes, Caleb might not be there. We need to be ready.”

The scrape of wood against the floor cuts the silence as Amias leans forward, forearms braced on the table, eyes sweeping across us until they settle on me.

“There’s something else we can’t ignore any longer,” he says, measured and grave. “The Shades are more organized than we believed. They’re not slipping through at random anymore. They’re scouting. Testing wards.”

Villin’s voice drops to a dangerous growl. “That means someone is opening the way from inside. Or the Seal is failing.”

My gaze flicks to Elias and Andrei. They’re listening intently, but I can see they don’t yet feel the full weight of what hangs over us.

Amias exhales slowly. “It isn’t only the portal. It’s what controls it. The real power behind the veil.”

Andrei’s frown deepens. “What are you not telling us?”

Villin’s eyes harden. “There are forces at play you don’t yet understand. William has his hand in this, and so does the Council. Elmaris wasn’t sealed for protection. It was sealed out of greed and fear.”

The truth settles like a stone in my chest, its weight suffocating.

Amias’s gaze doesn’t waver as he speaks the final blow. “Evanthe, Celeste’s mother, wasn’t killed in battle with a werewolf. William used the chaos to eliminate her.”

Suspicion sparks in Andrei’s eyes. “You kept this from us?”

The room shifts. Elias doesn’t speak, but the weight of his silence cuts harder than words.

Villin steps in, shoulders squared, gaze unflinching. “If we’re going to fight together, everything has to be on the table. No more secrets.”

A muscle jumps in Andrei’s jaw as he grinds his teeth. “Fine. But don’t hand me half-truths and expect me to be fine with them.”

I steady my breath, forcing myself to meet his stare even when my chest tightens. “You’re right. You deserve to know.”

Dragging a hand down his chin, Andrei finally mutters, “If William’s been pulling the strings all along, then he’s a hell of a lot more dangerous than we let ourselves believe.”

“Which means we don’t wait,” Elias says, leaning forward, his voice calm but unshakable. “We strike first.”

Across the table, Amias folds his hands, composure steadying the tension. “The portal has to be sealed before anything else. If it stays open, the Shades will keep coming, smarter and stronger every time.”

My gaze flicks to Villin, chest tightening. “How? Through a ritual?”

Amias inclines his head. “I can anchor the Seal, but my magic won’t be enough. Blood will bind it, and yours, Celeste, is tied to Elmaris. That connection is what gives it strength.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut. Villin’s face goes dark, his voice turning cold and sharp. “Then we do it. But William isn’t going to sit there while we make our move. He’ll come at us with everything he has. We need something to throw him off.”

“Leave that to me.” Andrei’s grin sharpens. “I’ve got debts to collect. I’ll call in favors, make sure his soldiers are looking the wrong way when it counts.”

The parchment map unfurls under Elias’s hands, his finger pressing to the shadowed sprawl of the South Garden. “The portal lies here. We lay wards around the perimeter first, catch the Shades before they scatter.”

Lines are traced with precision as Amias marks points on the map. “These junctions. Ley line crossings. Feed the energy through them, and the wards will reinforce the Seal instead of fighting it.”

The plan takes shape, but dread coils in my stomach. My voice comes out quieter than I intend. “And William?”

“We take him,” Villin says, his voice ice-cold. “Before he destroys everything.”

Amias nods slowly. “Taking him out cuts the head off the Council. It’s risky as hell, but we don’t have a choice.”

Andrei’s eyes light up with something dangerous. “Then we’re doing this. Seal the portal. Trap William. End it.”

Villin closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “He ran after the ball. The coward disappeared without a trace.”

“What’s eating at me,” Amias says quietly, “is that we can’t end this while he’s hiding in the shadows.”

“I think we should keep training at the Spire,” I push back, trying to keep my voice steady. “Get ready for when he finally shows up.”

Elias’s frown deepens. “It’s not fair. We’re out there risking our necks every day while you…” He shoots me an apologetic look. “While you’re stuck in Amias’s lessons, banned from real missions.”

His words hit something raw in Andrei. “Villin keeps you locked up and calls it protection, but it’s bullshit. It’s not fair to us, and it’s sure as hell not fair to you.”

“I’m not locked up,” I snap back, even though it doesn’t feel entirely true. “But yeah, sometimes it does feel like I’m trapped behind walls I never asked for.”

Andrei’s eyes narrow. “We put our asses on the line every day while you get bubble wrapped. That’s messed up.”

Villin holds up one hand, shutting him down. “This is temporary. I won’t watch her break again.”

Heat flares in my chest, making my voice stronger. “But I don’t want that. I don’t want to be kept at arm’s length. I want to fight with you, not sit on the sidelines like some porcelain doll.”

“We need both,” Amias says, nodding slowly. “Caution and courage. But finding that balance is the hard part.”

Andrei keeps staring at Villin, not backing down. “Then give us a timeline. How long do we sit on our asses? How long until we stop waiting around?”

Villin’s hands clench into fists. “Until we know we’re ready. If we screw this up, we lose everything.”

The silence that follows is worse than any argument. Turns out waiting might be the hardest fight of all.

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## CELESTE

Time doesn’t move the way it used to. It stretches thin, wound tight like a bowstring. Days blur together, their sharp edges worn down by repetition. The pain in my arm fades, the bruises lighten, but the wound beneath the surface—the one no healer can reach—lingers. It aches less now, though it never disappears.

They tell me to rest. They insist I’m still recovering.

No one explains how to rest when the world itself feels as if it’s holding its breath.

***

Morning light slants through the Academy’s tall windows, spilling pale gold across the stone floor. I wake before the others, slipping away while the halls still hum with silence. Outside, the training yard greets me with crisp air that pricks at my skin.

Magic stirs at my call, sparks flaring—brief flashes of gold, unshaped but alive.

Each day, I push harder. Not to prove myself to them, but to remind myself I am still more than their fear.

Sometimes Elias finds me there. He never scolds. He simply joins me, steady and silent, as if his presence alone is enough. When I stumble, he sets his weapon aside and studies textbooks he's borrowed, reading passages about coaxing flame from the air. Witchfire resists me, raw and untamed. Necromancy has always been my path, not light. Yet with him beside me, it feels almost possible.

We trade more glances than words. Sometimes he knocks me off balance just to catch the glare he knows is coming. Sometimes he lets me win and pretends I don't notice.

One morning, he presses a flask of chilled tea into my hands, his voice barely above a murmur. "You're getting stronger." Then he walks away before I can respond.

The words stay with me the rest of the day, close and protective, like armor I never asked for but desperately need.

***

Amias starts leaving books at my door without a word of explanation.

Some are about Elmaris: the politics, the history, how everything fell apart. Others are packed with magical theory that makes my brain hurt just looking at the cover. But I push through anyway. I read until my eyes burn and the candle is nothing but a puddle of wax.

Then he starts coming by in the evenings. Sometimes we talk. Other times, we just sit in the library, scribbling notes, the silence thick between us but not uncomfortable.

“Magic responds when you stop trying to force it,” he says one night, not looking up from his notebook.

“I’m not forcing anything.”

“Not with your mind.”

And damn if he isn’t right.

There’s this pull under my skin now. Like a tuning fork struck somewhere deep inside me, humming a note I can feel in my bones. I have no clue what it means. All I know is it gets stronger every time he walks into the room.

***

Lys shines with anticipation. She talks endlessly about the ritual—who might resonate, how it will feel, what it means to be chosen by fate. She has already decided what she’ll wear.

To her, it feels like a celebration.

As if fate is gentle. As if it is safe.

I smile at her excitement, but my chest tightens.

Because what if my path is already taking shape, even without the ritual? What if the people I’m meant to resonate with are already here?

***

Andrei watches me like a puzzle he hasn’t decided whether to solve or destroy. He trains harder than ever, violence his form of prayer. He doesn’t speak to me often, but when he does, his words cut deeper than any blade. Precise, never cruel.

Sometimes I find food left near my spot in the library—chips, a sandwich, a bottle of water with a note: *Drink this. Don’t be stupid.*

I always drink it.

***

Villin hasn’t laid a finger on me since that morning. Now he keeps his distance, but not really. His presence is like smoke, always there but impossible to pin down. He follows me through the halls, hovers at every door I pass. And every single night, when I’m lying in bed pretending to sleep, I can feel him right there on the other side of the wall.

There’s a battle raging inside his silence.

I hear it in the way he bites his tongue when I’m training. I feel it in how he lets the others pull me into their plans without saying a word. He thinks he’s protecting me by keeping secrets. But I’m not some kid who needs to be shielded from the truth. I’m not a candle that’s going to blow out if the wind gets too strong.

He’s scared.

I’m not.

Not anymore.

***

The portal hums beneath us, faint and relentless, like a heartbeat. Inevitable.

No one speaks it aloud, but we all feel it, growing stronger each day. The seals are fraying. The threads are coming undone.

We meet in quiet rooms, maps spread across scarred tables. We argue over wards, strategy, and blood. Amias traces ley lines with unsteady fingers. Elias sharpens blades in the corner. Andrei hurls knives into the wall until they bury to the hilt.

Whatever is coming is close.

And when it comes, I will not stand on the sidelines.

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## CELESTE

Late-morning light pours through the tall windows of Villin's house. The air feels unusually still, heavy with unspoken thoughts. I perch on the window seat, watching the world beyond the glass slowly stir.

Lys moves around the room, busy with preparations for the ritual. She glows with anticipation, her energy spills into every corner. I want to feel her excitement, but something keeps me still.

Her eyes find mine, soft. "Celeste, are you ready? The ritual starts in a few hours."

I hold her gaze. "I'm not taking part. Not this time."

Her expression flickers, but she doesn't look surprised. "I thought you might say that."

"It's not that I don't believe in the ritual. I do. But I already feel connected to Villin, Elias, Amias, and… Andrei. It's like I've known them for a lifetime."

"That makes sense," she says. "Here, it's not just about magic. Polyamory is about bonds and trust, not ceremonies."

I nod slowly. “I want to see these bonds grow on their own. If the ritual happens later, that’s fine. If it doesn’t, there will still be another chance.”

Lys tilts her head. “Some Axis bonds are platonic. Not every bond is forged in a ceremony. Some need time to grow.”

Relief loosens my chest. “I want to know what we are without fate forcing it.”

“I’ll be cheering for you,” she says, smiling. “Always.”

She turns back to the mirror. Her gown, a silvery blue that clings like mist, settles around her effortlessly. Sunlight scatters across the threads, shimmering like starlight. For a moment, she stands still, radiant. She doesn’t ask to be noticed, and yet she is impossible to ignore.

Her fingers tremble as she smooths the folds. Her eyes shine with nerves and hope. I watch her, caught between awe and the instinct to protect.

I pull the small bag of makeup closer. Rosewater and lavender lift from it, soft and comforting. I lift a brush and smile gently. “Ready?”

She nods, eyes closing. I sweep pale shimmer across her lids, light as air. Lys exhales, steadying herself.

“I’m not used to this,” she whispers. “Silk and shimmer instead of sweat and dirt.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “You deserve more than armor. You deserve to shine.”

Her lashes lift, gaze steady on mine. I trace liner along her lashes, add a soft blush to her cheeks, and a hint of rose to her lips.

“Better?” I ask.

She touches her face, eyes bright. “It feels… like a promise.”

I see the difference between us in that reflection. Her glow against my shadows. She is silk and light, effortless and unguarded, while I remain

wrapped in dark clothes, armor instead of softness. The contrast pulls at something deep inside me.

“You should wear this too,” she says gently. “Today. You deserve to be seen.”

I shake my head, a faint smile brushing my lips. “Not yet.”

Her fingers brush mine. “When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Lys breathes deeply and straightens. She’s radiant, a beacon dressed in starlight. I stay rooted in shadow, still searching for the day I can step into the light without fear.

When the door closes softly behind her, the house grows too quiet. Her warmth lingers only briefly before fading, leaving me alone in the silence.

I sink back into the window seat and press my forehead to the glass. Outside, the academy stirs. Robed figures drift across the courtyard, magic curling in faint ribbons around them. Beyond the trees, soft, solemn music rises, the kind that doesn’t need words to be understood.

The Resonance Ritual blooms like a flower opening to the sun.

And I am still here.

Not because I was left out. Not because I doubt the ritual—I believe in it. But I am afraid of what stepping into it too soon might mean.

They say the ritual brings clarity. Fate. A name etched into your bones. A bond written in threads older than memory. Axis and Echoes. Sometimes lovers, sometimes friends, sometimes something in between. Magic doesn’t care about categories; it simply decides.

And that is what I am not ready for.

Because I already feel something. With Villin. With Elias. With Amias. Even with Andrei, who watches me as if he doesn’t know what to do with the growing pull between us. It isn’t just an attraction. It’s familiarity, the

impossible sense that I've known them in another life, or alongside this one. Something inside me remembers them.

And that's what scares me.

If what we have is real, I don't want fate rewriting it.

What if the ritual confirms everything I feel? What if it doesn't? What if fate points them away from me?

The thought lands cold and heavy in my chest.

I press my hand to the glass. Sunlight spills across the courtyard outside. My reflection stares back—plain clothes, bare skin, faint scars, magic humming low beneath the surface. I don't look like someone ready to be chosen.

And truthfully, I don't want to be chosen, not like this.

I want to choose. I want something that grows because we stayed, not because fate demanded it. If our bond is real, it won't need a ritual to survive. And if it isn't, I'll know. There will be more chances. More mistakes.

I lean back and close my eyes. Lys is probably waiting to step into the circle now, her gown shimmering like starlight, her heart open. I hope whoever fate binds her to sees her as she deserves to be seen.

*But me?*

I'm choosing to stay here. Just for today. Not out of fear. Because for once, I want to see what happens when I stop chasing magic and let it come to me.

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The quiet upstairs hangs thick, almost tangible. I rise from the bed and move barefoot down the staircase, one hand brushing along the polished

banister. Voices drift up from the living room, low and tense. I hesitate at the edge of the hallway before stepping into the late-afternoon light spilling across the floor.

Villin sits in his usual chair, relaxed but watchful. Across from him, Amias paces, his cloak of deep violet and gold trailing behind him. A long golden staff leans against the couch, the crescent top cradling a crystal sphere that hums with power.

It’s not the cloak or the staff that unsettles me.

It’s his eyes.

Amias looks hollow, like a man who has not slept in days. Shadows cling beneath his lashes, his jaw tight as he swirls a glass of whiskey without drinking. The calm he usually wears has vanished, leaving only restlessness in its place.

Villin notices me first, his gaze softening slightly. “You should rest. Couldn’t sleep?”

“I didn’t try,” I answer.

Amias doesn’t look up immediately, his eyes tracing the amber liquid in his glass. Finally, he speaks. “I haven’t had a vision since the night of the attack.”

The words press against my chest.

Villin doesn’t react, but his fingers tighten around his glass. “None?”

“Nothing,” Amias says, exhaling and tipping his head back. “No whispers. No fragments. No dreams. It is as if She cut the thread clean through. I have been deaf ever since.”

“The Goddess?” I ask softly.

He nods. “She has guided me all my life, showing me pieces of fate. But since that night, since you bled out in the garden, there has been nothing.”

I picture Elias without his fangs, Villin without his control. That is what Amias feels like without visions.

Yet he still wears the cloak. He still carries the staff. Today, he is more than Amias. He is the Seer, the bridge between the divine and the ritual. His presence alone could pull fate into motion.

“I thought the ritual might break the silence,” he murmurs. “Perhaps She is waiting for me to stand outside the circle and offer myself again.”

“Or perhaps,” Villin says calmly, “She is waiting for you to stop offering yourself as a sacrifice.”

Amias exhales sharply and finally takes a drink. “Easy for you to say. You were not born with a god whispering in your head.”

“No,” Villin answers evenly, “but I know what it is like to build your entire identity around being useful.”

The truth hangs in the air, heavy and undeniable.

I look at Amias. Really look. His hands tremble. His eyes are tight with fear he hasn’t named. This isn’t only about the Goddess. It’s about control. About losing it. About walking into the most sacred ritual of our people and feeling alone.

“You don’t have to do this if you’re not ready. Maybe your father could lead it,” I say softly.

His gaze meets mine, something fractured flickering there. “I am ready. That’s the problem. I’ve always been ready. I was trained to be the bridge. That’s all I’ve ever been. But today, for the first time, I don’t know if I want to be.”

He sets the glass down and lifts the staff. The golden crescent catches the light as he adjusts his cloak with trembling hands. He turns toward the tall window, where the curtain stirs with the wind.

Villin rises, calm as ever.

The ritual is close now.

And Amias, dressed in divine purpose and silent doubt, is the one meant to call fate into motion.

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## CELESTE

Stillness coils around me, tight and suffocating. Villin left hours ago, called away on urgent business. Amias is gone, performing the resonance ritual. I am alone, and every shadow feels alive.

Sunlight slips low through the windows, painting the polished floors and heavy drapes in gold. I sink into the living room, dust settling on me like the weight of the day. Magic hums faintly in the air, a pulse I almost catch if I listen closely. The echo of the ritual drifts through the walls, mingling with the flicker of candlelight.

I should feel ready. Prepared. Instead, a knot tightens in my stomach. Something is coming, something I cannot outrun or fight.

The wind stirs outside, threading through cracks like a whispered warning. My heartbeat quickens.

Then a sharp knock breaks the quiet, impossible to ignore.

I freeze.

The moment stretches. My breath slows. The door stands between me and whatever waits on the other side.

I already know.

Another knock. Louder this time, unforgiving. I do not move. My pulse hammers, my body rooted to the spot.

A shadow crosses the threshold. The door swings open with slow, practiced ease.

William steps inside.

The man who destroyed everything I once loved. The man who killed my mother and sealed Elmaris for his own power.

His eyes lock on mine, cold and calculating, empty of mercy.

I rise, fists tight, fury coiling in my chest. There is no love left, only burning hatred.

“You are coming with me tonight,” he says, moving as if he owns the air itself.

“I would rather die,” I snap.

His smile chills me. “You do not have a choice. Not with what I have planned.”

The door clicks shut behind him, sealing away any hope of escape.

He closes the distance, voice low and hard. “Tonight is sacred. The night our kind draws closest to the Goddess. You will be bound by ritual whether you want it or not. Lorenzo is your future.”

My jaw tightens. “Who the fuck is Lorenzo? You cannot chain me to your pawns. I am not your possession.”

William laughs. “You are mine. And this time, there will be no escape.”

He studies me, choosing how much to reveal. His voice remains steady, sharpened by control. “This binding is not just about you. It is about power. Our power. The future of Elmaris. The balance of everything we have fought for.”

“You already destroyed everything worth fighting for,” I spit. “My mother died because of you. Elmaris is sealed because of your greed. And now you want to drag me into your game?”

He steps closer, his presence suffocating. “You think you can defy me? Defy fate? You are a pawn, whether you like it or not.”

“Then I will break the board.”

His smile darkens, a flicker of warning behind it. “Tonight, you will learn the price of rebellion.”

The fire in my chest roars hotter. “I am not afraid of you. I never was,” I say, forcing each word to land. My hands clench at my sides, pulse hammering beneath my skin, but I keep my face neutral, a mask of defiance. Every fiber of me wants to tremble, to run, to admit the truth I cannot speak aloud—how much I do fear him. Instead, I hold the line, letting the bravado carry the weight I cannot show.

He laughs, hollow and menacing. “We will see how long that lasts.”

His hand snaps out, seizing my wrist with iron strength. I twist free, stumbling back, but his eyes gleam with cold satisfaction.

“You can run, Celeste,” he says softly. “But you cannot hide.”

He grabs me again, unrelenting, dragging me through the shadowed paths. My protest dies in my throat. There is no mercy in his gaze.

We move quickly until he stops before a small, unmarked stone set into the ground. Power hums from it, old and dangerous. A portal stone, the kind reserved for Council.

William presses his palm to it. The air ripples, folding and bending like water struck by stone.

“Hold on,” he snarls, pulling me close.

Before I can resist, the portal swallows us whole, and the world tilts beneath my feet.

The world reforms inside the Grand Hall of Resonance. Magic clings to the air, thick and ancient, heavy with centuries of ritual. Hundreds of candles throw their flames across the vast stone floor, the glow of runes pulsing beneath our feet.

William shoves me into a side chamber. The chants of the hall fade behind the thick stone walls, leaving only torchlight and silence.

This chamber is wrong. The runes carved into the floor are harsh, designed for control, not unity.

A man waits against the far wall. Cloaked in shadow, tall and commanding, his gaze locks on me with unnerving intensity.

William gestures. “This is your fate. Lorenzo will bind you tonight, outside the Goddess’s light, outside your choice.”

The stranger steps forward. “This ritual is not a sacred promise. It’s a leash.”

I square my trembling shoulders. “I do not belong to you. I do not belong to him. I will never be bound.”

William’s smile twists. “You belong to me. And tonight, you will learn just how true that is.”

The torches sputter. Darkness coils around Lorenzo’s hands. The chamber thrums with raw coercion.

My pulse races, but I stand my ground. “I will never wear your chains.”

For a heartbeat, surprise flickers in Lorenzo’s eyes. William grabs for my arm, but I tear free, small golden sparks snapping from my fingertips.

He sneers. “You think you can fight me? You are nothing without the ritual. Without me.”

I laugh, sharp and bitter. “I am everything you fear.”

The chamber explodes with force. His darkness slams into my light, invisible currents colliding like storm against flame.

I reach deeper, past fear, past restraint, into the necromancy I buried. Cold power coils around my fingers and snakes across the stone. Lorenzo falters. William pushes harder, but I strike first.

White fire ignites in me, searing and unstoppable. I send it as a blade. They stumble back, William cursing, Lorenzo snarling, as shadow and flame twist tighter in my grip.

“You underestimate me,” I say, voice unshaken. “I am not yours to command.”

The chamber shakes. Ancient wards press down with the weight of a mountain. My strength frays, but desperation fuels me.

My gaze snaps to the door behind Lorenzo. Sealed. Warded. My only way out.

I weave shadow and flame, unraveling the sigils one thread at a time. They resist, burning hot, but I force them to bend. Crack by crack, the wards give.

“Stop this,” Lorenzo growls. “Or I will end you.”

“Try me.”

A final surge tears through me. The wards shatter, and the door groans open.

I lunge through and run.

The corridors streak past, my breath is ragged, my heart a war drum. The chants grow louder. I throw myself against the double doors and burst into the Grand Hall. This is the only place he cannot reach. Not here, not while

the Ritual unfolds. I could flee to the edge of the world, and still, he would find me and drag me back. I will not let it happen.

Light floods the chamber. Runes carved deep into the floor blaze with power. Figures in ceremonial robes stand in a perfect circle, voices rising like thunder.

Lys's eyes widen the instant she sees me. Relief floods her features, softening into something close to awe.

At the circle's edge, Amias grips his staff, its golden crescent gleaming in the candlelight. His calm is fractured, shadows drifting in his gaze like storm clouds gathering.

I lift my chin, forcing my voice to stay steady. "I will participate in the ritual."

The words strike the chamber like a bell, resonant and unyielding.

Lys's smile bursts radiant, her joy brightening the air. "I knew you would come. This is your moment."

Amias inclines his head, though sorrow lingers in his eyes.

"I claim my place as Axis," I declare. "And I will find my Echoes."

The hall falls silent. Even the flames seem to pause. Silver light ripples across the carved runes, spilling like fire over stone.

Amias lifts his staff. His voice cuts through the stillness. "The ritual of resonance begins."

The first name echoes out. A girl steps forward, trembling as she enters the circle. Mist coils, birthing a blurred silhouette at her side. On the opposite arc, a boy appears. Summoned by divine power. Two Echoes called, yet one veiled in fog, sealed in Elmaris.

"Incomplete," the circle intones. "One sealed."

The girl withdraws, shaken, as another name rises. This time, a boy strides forward. Two figures blaze into place beside him, clear and undeniable. A gasp sweeps the chamber. The runes flare gold. A complete Axis.

Lys grips my hand, her excitement trembling through me. “It’s happening.”

I nod, though my chest tightens like a vise. Because no matter how many names are called, one question gnaws at me.

When I step into that circle, will they appear?

Or worse, will they already belong to someone else?

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## AMIAS

The divine does not speak in words. It moves through light, breath, and bone. It coils down the length of my staff like liquid starlight and anchors in my spine, too vast for this body, too ancient for language. Still, I bear it. I guide it.

The Goddess sees through my eyes tonight.

I stand outside the ritual circle, watching another Axis seal into being. Runes flare beneath their feet, blazing with radiant fire. A surge of golden light swallows all three figures, wrapping them in warmth until the magic sinks into their skin like it has always belonged there.

They are complete.

I murmur the invocation in the old tongue, and the chamber quiets. The next name waits to be called, the next bond, the next answer.

But I lift a hand, signaling pause.

No one questions me. They never do.

Unease ripples through the crowd, but silence holds. I step back from the circle, feeling the divine loosen its grip on me. Like a collar unfastened, the

weight lingers, but I can breathe again. I can think again.

I cross toward the shadowed columns. The golden orb at my staff's crest dims, no longer demanding. I lean it against the stone, exhale slowly, and roll the tightness from my shoulders.

And that is when I see her.

Celeste.

She stands near the wall, barefoot, still, unreadable. She has not moved since she entered, calm but distant, as though the world reaches her only through a veil of glass.

My heart falters.

I thought she would not come. I thought she had chosen absence over this. Over me.

And now she is here.

My fingers twitch uselessly at my sides, yearning for the ritual to steady them. I could return to the circle. I could call the next name. I could let the Goddess flow through me again. It would be easier.

But I cannot look away.

She wears no ceremonial robes, no violet silks or gowns threaded with sigils. Only a loose shirt and soft pants, hair unbraided, eyes sharp. Everyone else seems carved from myth. She alone looks real.

And it hurts.

Because I told myself I had made peace with her absence. That it was a choice, clear and final. That I could bury disappointment beneath duty.

But she is here, and the ground shifts beneath me.

It's not only care. Not only the falter in my pulse when she enters a room, or the way her presence unravels me. It's the knowing. The recognition that lives in bone and blood.

And still, she did not come for me.

She came to claim her place. To step into her mantle as Axis.

It should be enough. Perhaps it is. Yet in this moment, it feels like betrayal.

Because I have carried her shadow since the night we touched, since her magic flared beneath my hands and bound itself to my shattered heart as if it had always been there. And then she left me with silence.

She knew what today would demand of me. That I would stand inside the current of fate, letting the divine hollow me until the last bond sealed. And still she chose to gamble everything between us for the chance to take destiny's hand.

I rub my thumb across my palm, trying to anchor myself in flesh instead of feeling.

I am the Seer. I am the channel of the divine. Mortal longing does not move me.

But when her gaze shifts to the circle, when she squares her shoulders to step forward and offer herself to whatever the Goddess will decide, I wonder if I have the strength to remain still.

What if the power does not call me to her?

What if it does?

And she does not care?

I take a deep breath, forcing air into my lungs, holding it there like penance. The weight of it burns, but I do not let it break.

This is not about me. It's about balance. About sealing the fractures of the world, about Axis and Echoes and the fragile thread between Earth and Elmaris.

The divine does not care about longing.

But I do.

I should rejoice in the order of it, in the sacred current passing through me. Instead, my chest tightens as my gaze slides, again, unwilling, relentless, toward her. Celeste stands outside the circle, her eyes on the ritual, her hands steady. But I know what it cost her to walk in here. I know what it cost me to let her. And if the Goddess binds her to anyone but me, will she even flinch? Or will she step forward with that same quiet conviction, offering her soul without hesitation, and never once glance my way?

The thought burns like acid in my veins.

The stillness breaks when the Goddess calls me back. It's not a voice, not truly. It's pressure shifting in the room, the sharp catch in my lungs, the flare of gold surging down the staff. Alive again, demanding.

I step forward. The staff strikes the floor and light cracks outward, silver and gold weaving into a circle of fire. The crowd falls into silence. Even the wind beyond the walls forgets to move.

"The next Axis," I declare, voice reverent though my throat feels raw, "Lysandra Valis. Step forward."

The chamber stirs, ripples of awe sweeping through the crowd. All eyes shift to Lys. She shines, her gown falling like poured starlight, her hands tight in front of her as though holding herself together. This is the moment she has bled and prayed for, and her face glows with it.

Celeste nods to her. A small gesture, but enough. Enough to shatter me.

Because Lys trembles, but she is not alone. She has Celeste's blessing. She has courage born of someone's faith. And for a heartbeat, I hate that it is not mine she sought.

Lys steps into the circle. Magic rises like a tide, curling around her gown, stroking her hair. She is accepted.

I raise the staff high. “Reveal her Echoes.”

The orb splits. Threads of light arc across the floor, weaving through stone like veins. They shiver, seeking, then snap taut.

The first blazes white gold. Caleb.

He stumbles into the circle, sleeves pushed back, coat catching the glow. His eyes widen, and then lock on Lys as though she is gravity. She exhales, hand trembling upward. Caleb lifts his own. Their fingertips hover apart, but the glow between them bridges the distance. The connection is undeniable.

A crack forms inside me, quiet and merciless.

The second thread flares.

Natrix. Chaos made flesh. His grin falters when his gaze falls on her, his smirk dissolving into something darker, unreadable. Lys falters under the weight of it, hand uncertain. Caleb steadies her with a glance, unthreatened. He knows this is not betrayal. It’s fate.

Two Echoes.

The air thickens. The orb convulses.

A third thread ignites.

But the light fractures. It spirals wrong, flickering, before condensing into shadow. A fog gathers at the circle’s edge, heavy, formless, faceless. Not absence, not death. Distance.

Every whisper in the chamber dies. Everyone knows what it means.

The third Echo is sealed in Elmaris. Alive, but too far to cross the veil.

Lys’s lips part. Relief and grief are battling on her face, joy breaking, then dimming with ache. Caleb’s jaw clenches, his eyes sharp as they cut

between her and the fog. Natrix drifts closer, measuring, calculating his place.

I soften my voice. “Three Echoes. One sealed.”

Lys bows her head, then raises it with tears in her eyes. “I will wait. However long it takes.”

The circle hums in approval. The bond seals. The light withdraws.

And I step back. My role is fulfilled. My face is calm. But inside, jealousy gnaws at me like hunger, relentless and hollow. Because even as I speak the Goddess’s truth, all I can think is how easily Celeste’s faith belongs to someone else.

And Celeste is watching from the shadows again.

Her eyes glisten, not with envy but with warmth, with pride, with relief. She is happy for Lys, genuinely happy, as though love costs her nothing to give. The sight of it cuts through me, because while she celebrates another’s fate, mine twists tighter with every breath.

Yet this moment is not mine to claim.

The staff in my hand pulses hotter, almost impatient. The circle hums with the rhythm of ley lines, the divine threading through stone and air. My throat is dry, my pulse heavy and loud. I already know what name will be spoken next. The Goddess does not need to whisper it to me.

Still, ritual demands the words.

“Celeste Nightmoor.”

Her name ripples through the chamber. Silence follows, deep and complete, as though even the walls have paused to listen.

She steps forward without hesitation.

There is no violet silk, no robe embroidered with symbols, no ceremonial gown meant to shimmer. She wears dark pants and a simple shirt. Her hair

is loose, her shoulders squared, her eyes steady and burning. Barefoot, she moves with a defiance that does not need ornament.

The runes ignite beneath her feet, gold racing up her skin like fire catching on dry leaves. The circle accepts her instantly.

Of course it does.

She belongs here.

I swallow against the ache rising in my throat. This is not how I imagined it, though I never allowed myself to imagine much. I was Seer, channel, servant. I told myself I was above wanting.

But the truth is raw and inescapable now. I feel everything, and none of it's pure.

I thought I would have more time. A few more evenings in the library, a few more conversations spoken too close and too quietly, a few more chances to learn her before fate carved her bonds into stone. The staff burns in my palm as the circle swells with energy.

I lift it, the words ash on my tongue. "Reveal her Echoes."

The orb trembles. Threads of light unfurl, searching for those bound to her soul.

I close my eyes.

Because what if I am not among them? What if I am, and it means nothing to her?

The Goddess does not wait for permission. A thread finds its mark, and power arcs across the chamber, bright and merciless.

I open my eyes and see her standing within the glow. Her chin is lifted, her hands steady at her sides, her body bathed in gold.

She is ready.

I am not.

The threads continue to spin, pulling the circle toward its next revelation, yet my heart falters out of rhythm.

The truth strikes hard.

I do not want to be one of many.

I want to be her choice.

Not because the Goddess has decreed it, not because destiny demands it, but because she looked at me once in the dark and saw something worth staying for.

Now I stand as nothing more than another piece in a prophecy I cannot shape.

The staff pulses in my hand. Another Echo is about to be called.

But I do not hear the name.

All I hear is the quiet breaking of something inside me.

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## CELESTE

“Celeste Nightmoor.” My name reverberates through the chamber like a spell. It flows from Amias’s lips, but the Goddess claims it as her own.

For a heartbeat, I freeze.

Everything in me wants to flee. Not from the ritual itself, but from the shadows that dragged me here. From what almost happened behind the locked door in another wing of this hall. Lorenzo’s face, sharp and cruel, burns in my memory. His hands, the sick curl of his smile, the way my father spoke of binding me to him as if I were nothing more than a pawn, a banner for his legacy.

I barely escaped.

If I hadn’t broken the ward, forced the lock, and sprinted barefoot through endless corridors, if I hadn’t burst into this chamber like a storm, this moment would have belonged to them.

But I made it.

And now this is mine.

I step forward.

Incense and magic thicken the air, pressing close as silence and expectation weigh down on me. I am painfully aware of my appearance beside the others. No ceremonial gown, no meticulous styling, nothing to mark me as ready. Just dark pants, a loose henley, hair in disarray, a scrape on my knuckle, my hands still trembling.

The circle does not care.

It flares the instant I cross the threshold. Gold and violet curl around my legs, alive, caressing, testing. The runes flare beneath my feet. I feel their judgment and their welcome, their recognition and acceptance.

Because I am an Axis.

Not because William says it. Not because a bloodline demands it. Not because the ritual requires it. I walked into this circle of my own will.

No one can take that from me. Not even the man who tried to steal it.

My father paces beyond the ward, trapped on the wrong side of the barrier. Rage and disbelief carve deep lines into his face. He thought he could steal this moment. He believed he could bend the Goddess to his will as he bends every living thing to his power.

The circle allows only two inside: the Axis and the Seer. He is neither.

Lorenzo stands beside him, equally locked out, powerless. I feel their presence, the weight of their eyes pressing against the ward.

Good. Let them watch. Let them see that I chose this. Not them. Not their golden chains, not their strings, not their rules. Me.

I lift my chin and find Amias.

He does not meet my eyes.

He looks broken in a way that is both holy and distant, as though speaking my name cost him more than I could ever understand. His staff glows

steadily, the divine humming through its golden spine. His violet robes pool at his feet. His face is unreadable. Alone.

My chest tightens.

Is he angry? Does he think I stepped into this circle to wound him? Does he know how desperate I was, clawing at fate like it was my only lifeline?

Because it was.

I did not come seeking love, or destiny, or clarity. I came because I refused to let my father chain me to someone who doesn't know my favorite color, who didn't bleed beside me, who didn't hold me after the dark. I came to burn William's plans to ashes.

If that means I walk out of this circle bonded to no one, so be it.

I will not be a pawn. Not in his games. Not in anyone's.

I take another step. The circle brightens. The hum of the ley lines grows stronger, vibrating through the bones of the world.

My magic stirs.

A familiar thrum rises deep in my chest. Not golden sparks this time, but something wilder, darker. My necromancy stretches and answers the ritual's pulse. It doesn't resist. It welcomes it, as if even that part of me knows I belong here.

Amias lifts the staff, his voice reverent, carrying the weight of the divine. "Reveal her Echoes."

Magic unfurls from the staff in slow, luminous strands, reaching outward like living threads, searching for those bound to me. Not by blood or politics, but by some ancient force that tethers souls across lifetimes.

I hold my breath.

Let it be them. Let it be him. Let it confirm what I have felt in my bones. That Villin's gaze wasn't a trick of my imagination, that it held something

sacred. That Elias's hand lingered because it wanted to, because it could. That Amias didn't lie with his eyes, even when he stayed close but never touched me again.

Let the Goddess confirm it.

Or end it.

The air thickens around me, heavy and shimmering, pressing behind my ribs. The runes beneath my feet pulse, gold twisting around me like smoke caught in starlight.

Then it happens.

A single thread of light lifts from the edge of the circle, arcs outward, crackling with purpose.

It finds its mark.

In one heartbeat, I am alone.

Next, he stands before me.

Elias.

Light flares around him. There is no sound, no wind, only the sharp, clean scent of metal and cedar. He blinks once, adjusting to the space, and then his eyes find mine.

His entire expression changes. Joy breaks over him, raw and unguarded, spilling across his features like the sun rising over water. His shoulders drop, tension falling away as if it had been holding him like a cage.

"Celeste," he breathes, and my name is a prayer on his lips, a miracle made flesh.

I move before I think, and I stop just short of him, rooted to the pattern of the circle, unwilling to disturb its sacred rhythm. My smile meets his, answering the one that spread across his face first.

It's him, it's really him.

A soft, shaking laugh escapes me. “I hoped,” I whisper.

He doesn’t break eye contact. “I knew,” he says, and it is everything I have been waiting to hear.

The words settle in my chest like both anchor and promise. I ache to reach for him, to feel the steady beat of his heart, to know this is not a trick of light. I stay still, holding the weight of the moment, letting it root me.

The circle shifts around us, acknowledging the bond. The runes beneath our feet spiral and blaze brighter. Threads of magic curl between us, settling across our hands and shoulders as if spun by the Goddess herself.

Gasps ripple through the hall. Whispers rise and fall. None of it matters.

Elias is here.

And he is mine.

My throat tightens with a feeling I cannot name. It’s not just joy or relief. It‘s the certainty that whatever comes next, I will not face it alone.

He steps closer, and I feel the heat radiating from him. “You did it,” he says.

“No,” I murmur. “We did.”

For the first time in days, I feel whole. Whatever the ritual brings after this, the tide has already turned. The Goddess has spoken.

Light gathers again, coiling along the edge of the circle. Gold deepens to violet, violet sinks to cobalt. The runes flare like veins of molten stone. Another thread lashes outward, and my pulse spikes.

The air fractures. Magic tears the space like a storm, and then he is there.

Villin.

His boots strike the stone with a heavy thud. His shoulders are squared, as if he has been ripped from a battle. His silver eyes sweep the circle, scanning until they settle on me.

He freezes, as if I have betrayed him, as if the air between us is a broken promise. He was not expecting this.

I take him in. His shirt is half unbuttoned, his hands curl at his sides. His jaw is tight, packed with words he has never spoken.

Villin, who protected me with silence.

Villin, who kissed me as if I were something ancient and unnamed.

Villin, who stands in a circle meant for soul-bound mates, looks as if he might fracture. His gaze flicks to Amias, who doesn't look up from his staff and does not intervene.

Then it lands on me again.

"Celeste," he says, low and raw, the sound reverberating through the chamber and settling deep in my chest.

It's not a greeting, not a question. It's the weight of everything he has kept buried, the truth he has never spoken, and the pull of what he cannot deny.

I feel it along my spine, in my chest, in the hollow where fear and knowing collide. Every moment we never shared, every glance left unspoken, rushes through me in a wave I cannot hold back.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he says finally, softer now, almost vulnerable.

I stay still. My silence says more than any words could.

His hands relax at his sides, but tension lingers in the set of his shoulders. His face is carved with both disbelief and awe, and beneath it something dangerous hums. Hope.

We are tethered, pulled together by a force older than choice. I stepped into this circle knowing it, and he cannot look away.

His breath rises and falls in a slow rhythm. "I don't deserve this," he admits.

“You never had to,” I reply, letting the words settle between us.

He does not answer, but his eyes speak louder than any confession. He is here. He is mine. No ritual, no fear, no distance can undo it.

The circle glows again, softer this time, a pulse of magic that moves like the breath of the earth. The air hums with power, but it is quiet, intimate. It waits, as if the world itself holds its breath for this moment.

Light gathers along the far edge of the circle, hesitating as though uncertain, and then it arcs, folding into itself like a held breath released. When it settles, a figure stands at the edge of the perimeter.

Andrei.

I blink, disbelief catching my throat.

He is frozen, dark shirt rumpled beneath a black jacket that does not suit the grace of this ritual. His arms hang at his sides, his jaw tight, his eyes wide and fixed on me.

He looks as if the world has shifted beneath him, as if the Goddess has made a mistake.

Villin tilts his head in confusion. Elias straightens beside me. Andrei does not move. He does not breathe, as if still calculating the impossible.

My heart skips a beat. The bond clicks into place, gentle but undeniable. It does not crash or flare. It simply is. A current beneath the surface, hidden until now, now threading between us with quiet insistence.

His fists tighten once, as if he is trying to resist what draws him forward.

When he finally speaks, his voice is rough and broken. “No.”

It’s a prayer, a refusal, a plea to retreat to silence and safety.

I take a step forward and whisper, “Andrei.”

His gaze drops to the glowing runes beneath our feet and then to Amias, who does not move and cannot lie. The ritual does not lie.

He meets my eyes again, and in that look, I see every unspoken word he has ever left behind. Not anger. Not fear. Something deeper, something raw and aching. Grief and desire mingled into one.

“You weren’t supposed to be mine,” he whispers, voice low and shaking.

He exhales slowly, as if the act of speaking costs him more than he can bear. “I can’t give you what they can,” he admits.

“I didn’t ask for anything,” I murmur, letting my voice carry the truth of my heart.

“That is the problem,” he says, each word sharp with quiet pain. “You never had to.”

We hold each other in silence, the space between us charged with longing and restraint. There is no kiss, no embrace, no tidy promise. Only the sharp, undeniable weight of what this means. Andrei, who never touched me, who spoke only when he had to, who left his care in subtle gestures rather than words, now stands tethered to me by a bond older than our hesitations.

He doesn’t move closer. I do not either. This bond is born from more than touch or choice. It’s a pulse, a current, a quiet claim that has always been ours.

The circle responds, settling into a steady hum. The runes dim to a gentle glow, the air thick with unspent magic.

Andrei tilts his head slightly, bracing himself. His eyes do not leave mine. Neither do I.

The room waits, the ritual waits, and in this charged silence, desire, grief, and hope collide. Every unspoken thought trembles between us, and still, we hold, knowing that what begins here will shape everything yet to come.

The hum rises again.

This time, it changes.

There is no burst of light. No crack of power. Only a slow, creeping chill that spreads across the stone, a tide rolling in from somewhere beyond this world.

I go still.

So does everyone else.

The air thickens with something ancient. A low vibration snakes up through my soles and into my bones, as if a hand reaches for me from across an impossible distance.

The circle glows pale blue. From its center, a shimmer rises.

Not a person. Not fully.

A fog.

It coils upward, a column of mist that pulses and drifts with impossible intent. Within it, a silhouette forms, more shadow than substance, no face, no lines, only presence.

Still, it feels real. Real enough to catch my heart and squeeze.

Gasps ripple through the hall. A whispered word cuts the quiet. “Elmaris.”

I do not turn. My eyes remain fixed on the figure in the mist. It stands apart from Elias, Villin, and Andrei, a distance that feels cosmic, not merely physical.

Amias’s voice floats across the chamber, almost reverent. “One is sealed.”

There is sadness in his voice. Reverence too.

The fog edges forward, reaching, straining, trying to close the space, but the barrier holds. It cannot cross.

My throat tightens.

I do not know who it is. I do not know the name that waits behind that veil. And yet I feel them—faint, aching, like a whisper that slips just out of reach.

This Echo is mine.

I cannot touch them. They cannot touch me.

The mist pulses once, hesitant, then withdraws, drawn back to the realm that cages it still.

The cold it leaves lingers, pressing against my skin and my chest.

I exhale, grounding myself. Magic hums through me, bright and insistent, but a hollow opens in its midst, carved by an absence I cannot fill.

I glance at the others. Elias watches with quiet understanding. Villin's jaw is set hard, every line tense. Andrei remains still, eyes fixed, expression unreadable.

Amias stares at the fading mist as if something within him has splintered.

This is not the end.

I feel it now, a thread deep in my chest, waiting, pulsing, calling for a hand that has yet to reach it.

The Axis is not whole.

Not yet.

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## AMIAS

I do not breathe. The fog lingers where the last Echo failed to cross, leaving a hollow chill that seeps past skin into bone and marrow.

Celeste stands at the center of it all—bare feet, wild hair, clothed in defiance rather than ceremony. A plain henley. Soft cotton pants. No silk, no jewels. A woman who refused to be claimed by anyone but herself.

My grip tightens around the staff, its gold still warm from the resonance I have poured into every Axis before her. The weight of the ritual coils along my spine, pressing behind my ribs like a hand too heavy to bear. Yet nothing has prepared me for this.

Not the years of training.

Not the silence from the Goddess.

Not even my own fear.

I thought I had made peace with watching her from the edges, with letting fate pass me by. I thought I could guide her toward her truth, even if that truth never reached me.

Then she stepped into the circle.

And now I can’t look away.

Her shoulders are squared, chin lifted, fragile and feral all at once. Stormlight and defiance etched into flesh. She glows, not from the ritual, but from sheer will.

My chest tightens. My throat dries.

The circle hums. Louder.

I drag in a shallow, uneven breath.

No. No, it cannot—

Blinding heat lances through my spine. My knees buckle before I understand. The staff clatters from my hands. The golden runes flare white-hot.

My vision fractures.

The chamber tilts.

Light erupts at my feet.

And then everything shifts.

In the blink of an eye, I am no longer at the outer ring where the Seer belongs. I stand inside the circle.

Silence descends like a living thing. The world itself holds its breath.

I look down at my hands, still trembling from resonance. I look up and find Celeste staring back at me. Her lips are parted. Her expression is unreadable.

No one moves. The circle does not reject me.

Because I was not pulled here by accident.

I was claimed. Claimed by her, by fate.

I am her Echo.

The realization strikes harder than any vision I have ever carried. My knees nearly give out again. My mouth is dry. My heart stutters, then

pounds against my ribs with something fierce, raw, and unbearably alive.

And then I feel it. That tether.

A golden thread stretches from her chest to mine. Not forged by magic. Not forced by the Goddess. It simply exists.

Celeste takes a single step toward me, and it's enough to undo me.

I should speak. Shape words into something worthy.

But I do not.

Because for once, I have none.

And for the first time in my life, I am not just the one who sees the future.

I am the future.

I was never just the guide.

I was always hers.

And she was always mine.

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## CELESTE

One moment, Amias stands at the edge of the ritual circle, steady and composed, the Seer cloaked in violet, his golden staff glowing faintly beside him.

Next, he is here.

Inside.

The air crackles, thick with power.

The circle accepts him. It does not reject him. The light around him pulses not with force but with recognition.

I feel it before I even understand it.

A thread pulls taut inside me, invisible but absolute, snapping into place like a lock clicking shut that had always been loose.

The final thread.

Amias. My final Echo.

My breath catches. My chest burns.

He is not looking at me, not fully. His eyes are wide, jaw clenched, hands trembling as if he cannot believe he ended up here. Disbelief etches every

line of his face. Beneath it, sorrow. I didn’t warn him I would do this. He thought I had chosen someone else. He thought I didn’t want him.

I take a step toward him. His eyes lift at last.

The moment stretches, louder than any declaration, truer than any vow. He is beautiful like this. Wrecked. Real. Unguarded.

I want to reach for him. I want to say I didn’t know. I want to scream that I chose this, that I chose them. Not because of fate. Not because of ritual. But because even when everything felt broken, I always came back.

To him.

To Villin.

To Elias.

To Andrei.

My chest feels too small for the swell of it. My fingers tremble at my sides.

Amias takes a small step forward. Barely a shift, but enough.

The circle flares beneath us. Light pours upward like a benediction. Magic winds around us, warm and absolute.

I have never felt anything so terrifying or so right.

He speaks at last, a whisper that shivers through me. “You really did it.”

I nod.

His lips part, but no words follow. His gaze drops, almost ashamed, as if he believes he should have foreseen this. Perhaps he should have. But part of me is grateful he didn’t, because I get to see him like this. Vulnerable. Unmasked.

Mine.

The Goddess chose him. But more than that, I chose him. For once, fate and I agree.

I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. I don’t know what dangers wait outside this circle. But I know this changes everything.

The hall falls silent, the quiet weighted and waiting, like the breath before thunder breaks. Runes flare beneath my feet, pulsing with the frantic beat of my heart. Golden light ripples along etched stone, but there is no comfort in it, not with the weight of so many stares pressing in.

Murmurs rise.

“Two vampires?” someone whispers.

“That’s unheard of.”

“She must have forced it.”

The words cut like glass, impossible to ignore.

Elias stands beside me, his smile unguarded, full of wonder. Villin hovers near, protective in the way his gargoyle instinct demands. Andrei watches from his corner, eyes sharp, shoulders tense.

And Amias—Amias stands across from me, his expression carved from shadow and light. Only moments ago, he conducted this ritual. Now he stands inside it. My Echo. Mine.

I never imagined him here. Not like this. Part of me dares to hope that despite his shock, something in him feels right about it.

The memory of the fog-shaped silhouette still lingers. Unformed. Unreachable. Pulled into Elmaris, sealed away. The fifth Echo.

Four visible. One hidden.

The world will not forget this.

My name will be stamped into the records. To resonate with even one vampire is rare. To bind two? That borders on legend. Vampires are sovereign, long-lived, too dangerous to claim lightly.

I want to retreat. To hide from the scrutiny, the politics, the fear.

But I do not.

I lift my gaze to the shimmer of light tracing my skin. This is who I am. Not because of bloodlines. Not because of destiny. Because I chose them.

The chamber stills as I step to the center of the circle, each footfall deliberate. My feet brush the cold stone. My clothes are plain. My hair is tangled. I am just myself.

And still, I shine.

“My name is Celeste Nightmoor,” I say.

The words echo like a bell struck in the dark.

“This is my Axis.”

Silence stretches, taut and fragile. Then a pair of hands claps.

Lys.

Tears gleam in her eyes. Her applause is steady, certain, a quiet affirmation. She looks at me as though she has always known this moment would come. Caleb and Natrix join her. Then others—students, mentors, witnesses who have seen me bleed and rise again.

The sound grows until it fills the hall, like thunder breaking across a stormy sky.

I remain still, letting it wash over me, and meet Amias’s gaze across the circle. For a heartbeat, the world falls away.

His expression is a tempest—pain, longing, shock, and something dangerously close to fear. His lips part, then close, hesitation carved into the line of his jaw.

The magic of the circle hums between us, golden light curling like liquid fire. I feel the thread that binds us, subtle but undeniable, a tether older than words, older than choice.

I do not step closer. I cannot. And yet, every instinct in me aches to.

Amias doesn’t move either. The Seer who commanded the ritual, now caught in its pull, standing inside the very web of fate he had been shaping with careful hands. Vulnerable. Unshielded.

And in that stillness, the world narrows until it contains only us, the pulse of magic, and the impossible certainty of what has been claimed.

I lift my chin, steadying my breath, letting the light trace the curve of my arms, the line of my shoulders. The hall may watch. The whispers may swirl like wind. But I am anchored. Anchored in them. Anchored in this choice.

The chamber doors slam open. The wards have fallen. A rush of air sweeps through, scattering the last threads of magic. Figures pour into the threshold. Dignitaries, unaffiliated supernaturals, bonded pairs. Their eyes are sharp with suspicion and awe.

“Is that Elias Dragovici?”

“Two vampires—impossible.”

“Saint Villin? From the Council?”

“The Seer. The Seer is in the circle.”

Questions crack through the air like lashes.

I am not dressed for the ceremony. Dust clings to my skin. A bruise shadows my jaw. Elias stands tall, pride blazing behind his glowing eyes. Andrei’s gaze is unreadable but fixed on me. Villin is pale, shaken. Amias looks as if the ground beneath him no longer exists, his staff abandoned at his feet.

“No precedent,” a voice hisses.

“This breaks everything,” another snaps.

Every word slices.

I lift my chin, though it takes everything in me to keep my voice steady. “The circle called me. I stepped forward. That is all.”

Villin steps up beside me, shoulders squared, voice edged with steel. “If any of you believe the will of the Goddess can be undone by politics, you are welcome to try.”

The room stills. Even the light above seems to flicker.

Amias doesn’t speak. His face is unreadable, but I catch the twitch of his clenched hand.

I turn to him. There is no apology in my eyes. Only truth. I did not do this to betray him; I did it to survive. To claim my place before someone else forced one on me.

The ritual is done. My Axis stands. Incomplete, yet undeniable.

Magic fades like mist in sunlight.

No one dares to speak.

Until Villin does. One word, low and deliberate.

“Enough.”

The golden ring flares, and light swallows us whole.

When it fades, the hall is gone. Behind us remain only stunned faces. And a circle burned forever into stone.

A sign that everything has changed.

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## VILLIN

The portal hums faintly in my hand before the magic dies away. Silence swallows the room, thick and suffocating. No one speaks.

Celeste sits pale but steady, her gaze fixed somewhere beyond these walls, as if the world outside matters more than the one we occupy. Elias's jaw is tight, his eyes sharp with hurt, a raw edge along his face. Andrei leans back in the shadows, quiet as ever, unreadable, every muscle held taut. Amias stands apart, hollowed out, as if the floor beneath him has vanished.

I should have seen it coming, but it still lands like a physical blow.

She didn't tell me. Not once. Not a word. She stepped into that circle alone, bound herself to ancient magic without warning, without trust. The weight of it presses down on me, iron-cold, relentless.

We were building something. Not just duty, not just necessity. Something fragile. The silences that felt like confessions. The nights she let me close enough to see the cracks in her armor. The moments I could almost believe she wanted me there.

*I thought it mattered.*

But maybe I was wrong. Maybe none of it meant anything.

My fists clench until nails bite into my palms. The walls of this room feel too close, pressing in like a cage. Rage twists in my chest, claws at my ribs. She chose fate, cold and indifferent, over the bond we were only beginning to form.

I pace the length of the room, each step sharp in the quiet. Elias's eyes follow me. I see my own hurt mirrored in his—betrayal, disbelief, the hollow sting of being cast aside. Andrei remains still, arms crossed, a statue of restraint, though the tension in his posture betrays him.

And Amias looks… broken. His lips are pale, jaw set tight. When our eyes meet, I see the fracture inside him that splits me open. His jealousy and longing, wrapped in his pride and restraint, shine as raw and unguarded as any blade.

We are all caught in the storm of what she has done.

Betrayal doesn't always roar. Sometimes it drifts in, slow and lethal, poisoning the space between heartbeats.

I want to demand answers. Why did she choose the ritual over us? Why did she shut me out? But the words taste like surrender. Because maybe I was never enough.

I look at her again. She sits on the edge of the sofa, hands locked in her lap, shoulders braced as if waiting for the executioner's blade. Maybe she is hurting too. Maybe this choice has torn her in ways I cannot see. But trust is more than pain endured. It's faith. And right now, faith lies in pieces between us.

I want to believe there is still hope, that what we had is not already gone.

Elias breaks first, quiet and edged with grief. "This isn't what I expected either. None of us did."

Amias steps forward, voice low but firm. “We don’t have the luxury of drowning in this. Whatever Celeste’s reasons, danger outside these walls hasn’t paused.”

The warning hangs in the air, thick and inescapable, but it does nothing to quell the fire coiling in my chest.

I turn back to her. “Why?”

The word slips out before I can stop it.

Her eyes lift, and for a heartbeat, I think she might answer.

“Why would you do that?” I press, louder now, taking a step toward her. “Why walk into that circle like none of us mattered?”

She opens her mouth, but I don’t let her speak.

“You told me you weren’t ready. You asked for time. You let me hold you as if it meant something. Was that all a lie?”

“No.” Her voice cracks. “It wasn’t—”

“Then what was it?” The words tear through the room, rattling the windows. “What was that, Celeste?”

Her jaw tightens. Tears glint at the edges of her eyes, unshed, bright as sparks in the dim light. “You think I did this to hurt you?”

“You didn’t think of me at all,” I spit, fury coiling in every syllable. “Or Elias. Or Andrei. Or Amias, who had to call your name, knowing you’d hidden this from him.”

The room vibrates with the weight of what is unspoken. Elias leans against the wall, arms folded, expression shuttered, the strain behind his calm like a coiled spring. Andrei stands rigid, a statue carved of shadow, gaze fixed as though she has fractured some logic he cannot repair. Amias looks hollow, gutted, his hands clenched, fingers white. Every one of us

knows the sting of being left in the dark, abandoned in the space she claimed for herself.

“I didn’t have a choice!” Celeste snaps, voice sharp enough to cut glass, to slice through the anger that fills the room. “I didn’t betray you. I saved myself.”

The words stop us cold.

“I was alone in your house,” she says, voice trembling. “You were gone. Amias was performing the ritual. Elias and Andrei weren’t there. And William—”

My stomach knots, a cold twist from gut to chest.

“He used a Council transport crystal. He dragged me into another chamber, hidden from the ceremony.” Her breath hitches, but she forces the words out. “He wanted to bind me. Tonight. To someone named Lorenzo. A commander he controls. I was going to be trapped. Used.”

Her hands shake, but she steadies herself. “I fought back. I burned through everything I had. The wards were too strong at first, but I found a crack. I shattered them and ran.

“The only way to stop it was to be bound by another. The resonance ritual was already in motion. If I stepped in, the Goddess would protect me. You would be there.”

“But you didn’t tell us,” Amias says quietly.

“I had seconds,” she fires back, turning toward him. “Seconds before I lost everything. If none of you had been called, I was prepared to live with that. I wasn’t trying to replace you.”

“Then why not tell us after?” Elias’s voice cracks. “You looked at me in that circle and smiled, as if you hadn’t just shattered us.”

“I smiled because I saw you,” she says, desperation threading her words. “Because I wasn’t alone anymore. Because it worked.”

Andrei tilts his head. “You thought we wouldn’t be chosen?”

“I didn’t know,” she admits. “That’s the truth of the ritual. You don’t know. I couldn’t risk hoping.”

Anger wants to root me to the floor, to burn and anchor me. It slips through my fingers, replaced by something colder, heavier—*fear.* The image of her chained to a man, stripped of choice, trapped in her father’s games, claws at me.

Celeste sinks onto the armrest, rubbing her face with trembling hands. “I’m not proud of it. But I’d do it again. Being used like that was not an option.”

Amias moves first and lowers himself into a chair, shoulders heavy, body sagging under the weight of it all. His voice is quiet, raw with restraint. “I wish you had told me. I would have helped.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I didn’t have time to be afraid.”

Elias turns toward the window, his profile bathed in silver light. The moon catches the sharp line of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders. He doesn’t speak. Andrei doesn’t move, but there is a subtle shift in his gaze, a quiet softening, almost imperceptible.

I close my eyes, forcing myself to breathe.

I want to rage again, to tear down walls with words and fury. I want to demand answers, claim what I thought was mine. But she is here. She is safe. And for the first time in hours, I allow myself to feel relief without guilt.

Perhaps survival is its own kind of choice.

Even if she didn’t choose me with words, she chose me with life. With courage. With the decision to step into the circle despite everything.

And for now, that is enough. Enough to hold the fragile thread of hope between us, unspoken but undeniable.

I open my eyes. The others remain still, each caught in their own storm of shock, fear, and understanding. The night presses in around us, the moonlight sharp and cold, but I can finally feel the faint pulse of something steadier—something we might still call ours.

For now, it’s enough.

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## CELESTE

The air still feels scorched from Villin’s fury. From their silence. From everything I said and everything I couldn’t say.

I stand in the middle of his living room, surrounded by the four men fate marked as mine, and I have never felt more alone. I should feel relieved. I should feel safe now that the worst has passed. Instead, the quiet presses harder than the ritual chamber ever did.

I breathe in slowly, trying to loosen the knot in my chest. My hands still shake from the magic, from the sprint, from the memory of that cursed portal stone William used. My father almost won. If I had hesitated for even a heartbeat longer, I would not be here. I refuse to finish that thought.

“I’m sorry,” I say at last, my voice stripped bare. “For choosing what must have looked like betrayal.”

No one answers. The silence is a wound that will not close. So I do what I have always done. I keep speaking, even when it hurts.

“Everything in me screamed to run, but I stayed. I fought and claimed what was mine.”

Still nothing. Their gazes weigh heavier than stone. I look at them one by one.

“Elias. You taught me to sharpen more than blades. You taught me that strength isn’t only what I carry—it’s what I allow myself to feel.”

He shifts, barely, but his eyes don’t rise to meet mine.

“Andrei,” I continue, voice steady though my throat burns. “I never expected gentleness from you, yet you gave it anyway. Even when you tried to hide it.”

He nods once. His arms remain crossed, but something softer flickers in the storm behind his gaze.

“Villin.” My voice catches on his name. “I wanted to tell you. I did. But by the time I had a choice, I had none.”

His head lifts, eyes burning with a fire I cannot face without wincing. “You still had a choice,” he says, the words cutting clean and deep. “And it was not me.”

His voice is raw. Wounded. The kind of wound that bleeds inside where no hand can reach.

Finally, I turn to Amias. “I didn’t want to lose any of you,” I whisper. Even if the bond had been platonic, I needed to know. I needed to escape him. This was the only way, and I will not feel guilty for saving myself.”

Amias closes his eyes, but doesn’t speak.

A soft knock breaks the silence. Just a brush of knuckles on polished wood. Yet it crashes through the stillness like thunder.

Every head turns, and for a second, no one moves.

Villin crosses the room, shoulders rigid, and opens the door without a word.

Lys steps inside. Her gaze sweeps from Villin to the others before settling on me. “I came as soon as I could,” she says, voice steady but edged with urgency. “People are already talking. The Council is scrambling. The resonance chamber is sealed. They have never seen anything like this.”

Her eyes widen as she takes us in; awe and disbelief war in her expression. “Celeste,” she breathes as she crosses the room. “You did it.”

I’m not sure if she means escaped, resonated, or simply survived. Perhaps all of it. She wraps her arms around me, and for a fleeting moment, I let myself lean into her. My hands tremble, my shoulders sag beneath the weight I can no longer hide.

“What are they saying?” Villin’s question is sharp.

“The guards tried to breach the chamber after the surge,” Lys explains. “They didn’t see the full details, but the entire hall lit up. That level of resonance hasn’t been recorded in centuries. Multiple vampires in one Axis, a gargoyle, a Seer—it’s without precedent.”

“It’s illegal,” Amias says quietly.

“Technically,” Lys replies. “But only because no one ever thought to write rules for this.”

“They will now,” Villin mutters, turning toward the fire. His jaw locks. “They will try to control her.”

“I am not letting them,” I answer before caution can silence me.

Elias finally lifts his gaze. “You stepped into a sacred ritual without Council sanction. That alone triggers a formal inquiry.”

“They would have dragged me into one regardless,” I snap. “Bound to Lorenzo against my will, or standing beside you with fate burned into my skin. At least this way, I chose.”

“And now the Council views you as a threat,” Lys says gently. “Not for what you have done, but for what you might become.”

The quiet stretches, taut and dangerous.

Amias breaks it. “William will twist this. He will claim you manipulated the bond. That you forced it with dark magic. That you corrupted the ritual for your own gain.”

“That is a lie,” I say.

“He doesn’t care,” Villin replies. His tone is bitter. “Men like William don’t deal in truth. They deal in power. You have become something he cannot own. That makes you dangerous.”

Lys pulls a phone from her coat and hands it to Villin. “The Council has already called for a hearing. There is talk of neutralizing the Axis until the investigation concludes.”

Andrei’s voice cuts through the silence. “What does that mean?”

“Confinement,” Villin answers. “House arrest. Magical suppression. Public interrogation. It depends on how badly they want to make an example.”

*Of me.*

I draw a shaky breath and meet each of their eyes. The men who stood stunned in the circle, torn between betrayal and fate. The men who are still here.

“If they want to come for me,” I say, my voice quiet but unshaken, “let them.”

Amias lifts his head, resolve burning through the hollow ache in his gaze. “Then they will have to go through all of us.”

Villin studies me, his expression unreadable. Not forgiveness, not yet, but something sharper—protective, unyielding. “I will delay the hearing,” he

says at last. “If I must, I will pull rank.”

“You will risk your place on the Council,” Lys cautions.

He shrugs, heavy with defiance. “Then let them come for me as well.”

The silence that follows is no longer empty. It vibrates, thick as storm air before lightning strikes, and I am not facing it alone.

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## CELESTE

The air in Villin's study feels heavier than it should, thick with truths no one wants to say aloud. Books line the walls like silent judges, and the fire crackling in the hearth throws restless shadows across the dark wood floor. Amias stands near the window, arms folded, his reflection caught in the glass. Villin leans against the corner of his desk, still as stone, but I can feel the storm coiled behind his eyes.

I stand between them, my skin humming with leftover magic, with nerves, with the knowledge that I forced this outcome on all of us.

Villin breaks the silence first. "We've been placed under house arrest. Effective immediately. The Council delivered the order by decree." His gaze cuts toward Amias. "Your father signed it."

Amias doesn't flinch. "Of course he did."

"They're calling it a containment measure," Villin continues. "Until your twenty-fifth birthday, until your transition begins."

The words scrape against my chest. "And then what?"

Neither of them answers.

I move closer to the fire, chasing warmth that doesn’t quite reach me. “They think keeping us here will stop what’s coming.”

Amias turns from the window, his expression unreadable. “No. They think it buys them time to decide what to do with you.”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “How generous.”

“It won’t last,” Villin says. “They’re afraid. You walked into a sacred ritual, broke every boundary carved into stone, and still came out with the rightful Axis.”

I look from one to the other. “So what now? Do we sit here and wait for William’s next move? Wait for the Council to decide if I’m too dangerous to exist?”

Amias shakes his head. “We don’t wait. We plan. We use the time they’ve given us.”

Villin pushes off the desk and steps closer, his voice low. “We gather allies. Quietly. People we trust. Those who remember Elmaris as it was. Those who still want the royal line restored.”

The name rises to my lips like poison. “And William?”

“No,” Villin says, eyes dark. “He won’t stop. Not after this. But he’s shown his hand. Trying to bind you to one of his puppets during a sacred rite is desperation. If we get the right people to hear about it, it’s political suicide.”

Amias tilts his head, thoughtful. “We’ll need proof. Something undeniable. The portal stone. The marks of the binding. Did he use a ritual dagger?”

The memory flashes through me. Cold iron. A glint of obsidian. The sound of shattering. “Yes. I think I broke it. The pieces might still be in the chamber.”

Amias’s eyes flick to Villin. “I can retrieve them.”

Villin nods. “Before they scrub the evidence.”

The thought of either of them going back there twists my stomach. “I can go with him.”

Villin’s head snaps up, eyes burning. “No.”

Amias studies him but stays silent.

I fold my arms, refusing to back down. “You don’t get to lock me away. Not anymore.”

Villin’s voice is taut with control. “This isn’t about control. It’s about keeping you alive.”

“You don’t keep me alive by hiding me. Not after everything.”

Amias lifts a hand. “Enough. Celeste stays. I’ll go. We’ll have what we need before sunrise.”

The room falls quiet again, but this silence carries weight. Not cold. Not broken. Waiting.

Villin drags his fingers over the polished edge of the desk, gaze distant. “The Council thinks they’ve contained a problem. What they’ve done is concentrate it. The four of us are here, with her. With time. With reason.”

Amias meets my eyes. “They’ve given us exactly what we needed.”

I let that sink in. The fire snaps in the hearth, sparks scattering like small stars.

We are not broken. We are together. And war is coming.

***

The study is quiet except for the fire. Shadows flicker along the bookshelves, stretching across the polished wood as if they, too, are

listening. Amias has left with a promise to return before dawn, and Villin hasn’t moved from his place near the hearth.

“You’re still angry,” I whisper, the words trembling into the firelight.

He doesn’t move. His gaze stays fixed on the flames, their restless glow reflected in his eyes. “I’m afraid.”

The admission strikes deeper than anger ever could.

When he finally turns to me, the truth is written across his face—fear, yes, but also grief so raw it has never been soothed, and beneath it a hunger he has never dared name.

“You chose something we couldn’t control,” he says, voice rough.

“I chose to live,” I breathe.

He closes the distance, step by measured step, the shadows seeming to fold around him. “You chose us.”

“Yes.”

The fire crackles, filling the space between our breaths. Then he reaches for me. And this time, I don’t pull away.

His lips meet mine, careful at first, reverent, as though I am something fragile. The kiss deepens, drawing a shiver through me, heat curling low in my core. My body leans into his instinctively, as if it has always known to yield to him.

I have wanted this—wanted him—even when I told myself I hated him. Even when I thought he hated me.

The ache inside me sharpens, blooming into something unbearable as his mouth claims mine again and again. His hand presses against me, holding me closer, until the world shrinks to firelight and the rhythm of his breath tangled with mine.

He guides me back without breaking the kiss, until the couch brushes the backs of my legs. The cushions wait like an unspoken invitation. His lips linger, his breath unsteady, his body pressed close as if asking a question neither of us is willing to leave unanswered.

“I need to see you,” he murmurs, his voice raw.

“Then look.”

He peels my shirt over my head. The firelight washes over my bare skin, and his breath catches. His gaze trails over me with devotion, like worship. His hands skim my ribs, my waist, my back, each touch reverent. He lowers me onto the cushions and kneels between my thighs.

“Tell me to stop, and I will.”

“I won’t.”

He strips away the last of my clothes, leaving me open to the heat of the fire and his stare. His voice cracks when he whispers my name.

“You’ve seen me before,” I tease.

“Not like this.”

His mouth follows the path of his hands—over my thighs, my stomach, my breasts. When he takes my nipple between his lips, a sharp cry escapes me.

“I’ve wanted you like this from the beginning,” he admits hoarsely. “And I hated myself for it.”

I drag him back up to kiss me, desperate, trembling, as if the contact itself could steady the chaos inside me. His mouth tastes of whiskey and hunger, sharp and intoxicating, every press of his lips stoking a fire I can’t contain.

“I want to taste you,” he breathes against my lips.

“Please.”

His tongue strokes over me, slow at first, then firmer, deliberate. He worships me with his mouth until my hips rise to meet him. Pleasure surges through me in waves, pulling me apart.

When his tongue circles my clit, I moan his name. He looks up, eyes dark with awe. “You’re so beautiful.”

For a heartbeat, I almost let myself drown in it. Almost let the secret stay buried. But the truth presses sharp inside my chest.

This time I need more. I need all of him. And if I take that step, I can’t let him discover what I’ve hidden. I have to give him all of me, even the parts I fear are not enough.

“Villin,” I whisper, voice trembling. “I’ve never… done this before.”

He freezes, his breath unsteady. Slowly, he rises over me, his hands framing my face as though I might vanish.

“You’re a virgin?” His voice is raw, reverent, almost broken.

Shame pricks hot at my skin, but I force myself to meet his gaze. “Yes. I was afraid to tell you. Afraid you’d treat me differently. Afraid you’d think I wasn’t enough.”

His thumb strokes my cheek, grounding me. His eyes burn, not with judgment, but with awe.

“Celeste,” he says softly, “you are more than enough. You are everything.”

His hands grip my hips as he positions himself above me, the blunt head of his cock pressing against my entrance. I can feel the heat radiating off his body, the weight of him looming over me. My heart pounds in my chest, a mix of nerves and anticipation coursing through my veins.

“Shh,” he murmurs, his forehead coming to rest against mine. “You’re safe with me, Celeste. I would never hurt you.”

I nod, my arms wrapping around him, holding him closer. I can feel every inch of his skin against mine, the hard planes of his chest, the solid muscle of his thighs. All of my fears, all of my hesitations melt away in that moment. I've wanted this—wanted him—more than anything, even when I thought I couldn't have it.

He begins to push forward, his thick cock pressing against me, stretching me in a way that makes my breath catch. The first inch is painful, almost unbearable, fire and ache spiking together as my body tightens around him. I gasp, fingers clutching the couch, nails digging in, my muscles straining to adjust. Every nerve is alive, buzzing with the tension between pain and want.

He pauses, letting me breathe, letting me sink into the sensation. My body quivers beneath his weight, the heat coiling low until it spreads through every nerve ending, setting me alight. The ache is sharp, but it isn't cruel—it's threaded into the moment, woven into the reality of him entering me, of him claiming me. My hips tilt up instinctively, seeking him, welcoming him deeper, even as the sting lingers, even as my body learns the shape of his. The pain and the pleasure blur until I can no longer tell where one ends and the other begins.

Each small push forward sends a tremor through me. My body remembers how to give, how to take, how to cling, even as it protests in a shiver and a gasp. He's slow, deliberate, and I feel each inch, each heartbeat between us, the taut tension of my muscles meeting his, the surrender and the craving building in tandem.

I cling to him, trembling, my mind hazy with the mix of sharp ache and rising warmth. It hurts so exquisitely, so achingly, that my body forgets

everything but him, forgets the world outside the curve of his body against mine.

And then, almost imperceptibly, the pain softens, folds into heat, and I am burning, trembling, desperate, ready for everything he has to give.

“Fuck,” he groans, his breath hot against my ear. “You feel incredible, Celeste. So fucking tight and perfect.”

I can only whimper in response, my hands roaming over his back, his shoulders, his ass, urging him on. I want to feel every inch of him, want to be filled up completely.

He starts to move, his hips rolling in slow, deep thrusts, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through my body.

“Yes,” I breathe, my nails digging into his skin. “Please, more. I need you.”

He picks up the pace, each thrust driving deeper, harder, until the air itself seems to pulse with the force of him. The couch creaks beneath us, every movement fierce, relentless, claiming. Heat coils tight inside me, the pressure building until it feels unbearable, my body strung taut, trembling on the edge of breaking. Every stroke pulls me closer, winding me higher, until I know I’m about to snap.

“Come for me, Celeste,” he growls, his hand sliding between us to stroke my clit in time with his thrusts. “Let me feel you come on my cock.”

I do, my orgasm crashing over me like a tidal wave, my body shaking with the force of it. I cry out his name, my pussy clamping down around his cock, milking him for all he’s worth.

He follows me over the edge with a hoarse shout, his hips jerking as he cums inside me. We collapse together in a tangle of sweaty limbs, both panting and trembling in the aftermath.

“Celeste,” he rasps, his lips brushing against my neck. “That was... fuck. That was amazing. You’re amazing.”

I can only smile, my arms wrapping around him, holding him close. “So are you,” I whisper, my lips curving against his skin. “So are you.”

The door opens. Elias stands frozen on the threshold, eyes wide, lips parted.

Villin lifts his head, slow and deliberate. “You should leave,” he warns, low and firm.

Elias doesn’t move. His gaze flicks to mine. Vulnerable and uncertain.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he whispers. “I just… I heard.”

I reach out, voice trembling but clear. “Stay.”

The word changes everything.

Villin glances at me, then nods once.

Elias moves closer, kneeling beside the couch, hesitant. His hand brushes damp strands of hair from my face. He presses a gentle kiss to my cheek, then my lips, tentative and searching. He’s here. He chose to be here, even now.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers.

Villin moves again, slow and deliberate. I moan into Elias’s kiss, surrendering fully to the sensations consuming me. Elias’s hands trail down my stomach, lower, finding my clit, stroking in time with Villin’s thrusts. My body arches, caught between them, every nerve alive, every breath ragged. I am theirs. I am theirs completely.

“I want to touch you,” Elias murmurs, hesitant, voice raw with need. “I don’t know if I’ll do it right.”

“You will,” I gasp, voice barely a whisper.

Villin glances down, a flicker of confusion in his gaze. “You’ve never done this before?”

Elias swallows, looking down at the bloodstained couch. “Neither had she.”

“You’re a virgin too?” I whisper, awe and desire mingling in my tone.

His cheeks flush. “Yeah.”

Heat crashes through me, sharp and consuming, as Villin presses into me. Every nerve fires, every pulse screaming for him. Villin’s lips find mine, teeth grazing, tongue teasing, while Elias’s fingers stroke faster, coaxing fire from deep inside. Villin’s groan vibrates through my chest, low and primal, and I arch into him, gasping, shivering, desperate.

“Come for us,” he growls, voice rough and claiming.

I do. My body clenches, trembling around him, dragging him with me as I cry out into Elias’s mouth. Elias doesn’t hesitate. His hands trace me, gentle and urgent, lips brushing my temple, down my neck, over my shoulders. My body quivers under him, caught in a tide of need so overwhelming it steals my breath.

“Please,” I gasp, voice raw with want. “I need you.”

“Are you sure?” Elias whispers, reverence and hunger shining in his eyes.

“Yes,” I breathe. I want all of this. I want them. Every inch, every touch, every claim. I need them both, *and I need them now*.

Slowly, he rises to his feet, hands moving to unbutton his shirt. One piece of clothing, then another, until he stands bare in the firelight. He isn’t practiced like Villin, not confident in how he shows himself, but that only makes it more beautiful. His chest rises quickly, his skin pale against the glow, muscles taut with restraint. I notice the girth of his uncut cock, thicker

than Villin's. He hesitates just a moment, then slides between my legs with careful reverence.

His hands grip my waist. The first slow push makes me tense, a sharp stretch that eases into warmth. I feel the soreness of what Villin did, but no sharp pain now, only the shock of being filled again, different but no less overwhelming.

Elias exhales hard, forehead pressing to my shoulder as if the weight of it undoes him. “Goddess… you feel like nothing I imagined,” he whispers, voice rough with awe.

He moves carefully, seeking a rhythm that matches the rise and fall of my own. His cool skin presses against mine, the contrast sparking through every nerve, igniting a fire I can’t contain. His grip tightens on my hips, firm and possessive, as if he’s terrified I’ll slip away.

The pleasure coils inside me, deep and steady, spreading through every fiber of my body. When his glowing eyes finally find mine, they hold wonder and reverence, a hunger that seeps through, impossible to hide.

“I can’t hold back,” he breathes.

His mouth brushes my neck, teeth grazing. The moment lingers, then he bites.

I gasp, my body arching as sensation explodes through me. The bite isn’t just heat or pain; it’s a rush of electricity, tethering us together. Blood and desire spiral into one as he drinks, his hips jerking harder as his release tears through him with a ragged groan.

The world narrows to the searing pulse at my throat, his body heavy and trembling against mine, and the wave of my own climax that answers his, rolling through me until I’m shaking.

When it’s over, he lifts his head, lips stained, breath shuddering as if he’s afraid to breathe too hard and lose me. “You’re the only one,” he whispers.

I cradle Elias’s face in my hands, my voice lost somewhere between my racing heart and the aftershocks trembling through me.

Beside us, Villin shifts closer. His hand finds mine, grounding me, pulling me back to reality.

Elias still trembles against me, Villin’s hand binds me to the present, and between them I feel it—this isn’t an ending. It’s the first step into something larger, wilder, unstoppable.

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## CELESTE

I wake to the scent of vanilla, mingled with the fading heat of sex. Villin lies behind me, one arm draped heavily across my waist, his breath steady against the curve of my neck. In front of me, Elias is curled on his side, his hand loose over mine beneath the sheets.

For a few heartbeats, I stay perfectly still, letting it sink in.

The Council. The house arrest. The ritual I shattered to save myself. To choose them. And last night—Villin's hands, Elias's bite, the way I gave in to both of them as if my body had always known the path.

I should feel undone. Guilty. Confused. Instead, I feel anchored.

Carefully, I ease out from beneath the covers. My body aches, low and sweet, every shift a reminder of what happened. There's a dull soreness between my thighs, the faint sting where Elias's fangs pierced my skin. My fingers brush the mark at my neck before I let my hand fall.

I pull one of Villin's shirts from the chair. It swallows me in fabric and scent. My bare feet whisper across the floor as I slip into the hall.

The house is still, every creak in the wood echoing more loudly than it should.

I make my way to the kitchen expecting quiet—coffee, a moment to breathe—but Amias is already there.

He sits at the long table with a mug cradled between his hands, his green eyes lifting to meet mine with a calm that feels deceptive. Beside him, Andrei leans back in his chair, shirtless, the pale morning light catching the lines of muscle across his chest.

I cross to the counter for a mug, forcing my movements to remain even though my legs are still unsteady. “Morning,” I manage.

“You’re up early,” Andrei says, his voice low, carrying something unreadable.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Amias’s gaze doesn’t waver. His eyes settle on my throat, on the mark. His fingers tighten around the mug until his knuckles blanch.

“Did something happen last night?” His voice is quiet, but sharp.

The truth weighs heavily, but I know I don’t want to hide anymore, not from them.

“Yes,” I say, letting the word fall into the silence. “Everything did.”

The air thickens around us, heavy and expectant. I pour coffee, stirring slowly, though the spoon trembles faintly in my grip.

Amias sets his mug down, the sound gentle yet final, cleaving through the quiet. “Do you understand what it means? What did you do with Elias?”

I turn toward him, my voice steady though my hands aren’t. “I know he bit me. That he tasted my blood.”

He exhales slowly. “He didn’t just bite you. He marked you. Claimed you in a way no vampire has dared in centuries.”

My pulse stutters. “What are you saying?”

“When Elias marked you during sex, it created a bond. Not only emotional, but magical. Permanent.” His words hit me like a physical blow. “You were already an Axis. But now? That bond altered your resonance entirely. You absorbed a piece of his nature, his blood, his essence, his lifespan. And through you, so did the rest of us.”

I grip the counter for balance. “Wait. You mean Villin… even you—”

“All of us,” Amias confirms. “Immortality, through you. Elias gave it, and your Axis inherited it.”

Andrei leans forward, a crease cutting his brow. “Could it be dangerous?”

“Potentially.” Amias doesn’t soften the word. “It could destabilize the Awakening. Or give her power none of us yet understand.”

“So what do I do?”

“You cover the mark,” Amias says. “The Council cannot see it. Not now. If they learn Elias bound you before the Awakening, they’ll call the resonance void.”

My hand drifts to my throat, to the faint sting where Elias’s fangs broke my skin. It still burns. “I didn’t know it would do this.”

“I believe you,” he replies, his voice gentler now. “But belief won’t matter when the Council comes for you. Until your birthday, it has to stay hidden.”

I nod slowly. “No one will see it. Not yet.”

Andrei offers the barest smile, as if to ground me. Amias inclines his head in approval.

The moment shatters with the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Villin enters first, barefoot, hair tousled, dressed only in dark sweats and a shirt that clings to his chest. His silver eyes find me at once. Without

hesitation, he crosses the room, cups my jaw, and claims my mouth with his.

It isn't gentle, but It isn't rough either. It is possession, promise, and an unspoken vow pressed against my lips.

A sharp inhale, not mine, breaks through.

I turn in time to see Elias in the doorway, chest bare, pants slung low on his hips, eyes glowing faintly crimson. For a heartbeat, he looks almost feral.

"Don't," he growls, voice guttural.

Villin arches a brow, unimpressed. "Morning to you, too, little brother."

But Elias doesn't look at him.

He looks at me. At my mouth. At the mark.

And then he's moving. In three strides, he's in front of me, one hand cupping the back of my neck, pulling me down into his lap as he drops into the nearest chair.

A soft gasp escapes me, but I don't resist.

"You smell like me," he murmurs against my throat, his arm tight around my waist, body trembling with restraint. His fingers spread across my hip as though anchoring me in place.

"I wasn't going anywhere," I whisper.

He doesn't answer. He only holds me closer, breathing me in like I'm air.

Behind us, Amias lets out a low chuckle that cuts the tension. "Well. That didn't take long."

Andrei reclines again, silent, but I can feel the intensity of his focus on us.

Villin, unbothered, pours coffee into two mugs. "I assume she still takes hers black," he remarks.

Elias growls low in his chest, but doesn't stop him.

Amias pushes his own mug aside. “We need to speak of the mark.”

Villin’s attention sharpens. “What about it?”

“It wasn’t just instinct. It created a magical bond. Through Elias, she has already inherited longevity. And through her, all of us.”

Villin sets the mug down with deliberate care. “You’re telling me I’m immortal now.”

“Almost,” Amias replies. “Onyx could still kill us. But yes. Through her—through him—the rest of us now carry his lifespan.”

Andrei exhales a low whistle, but says nothing more. Elias only lowers his mouth to my throat again, softer now, as if to soothe the sting of the truth.

Villin studies me in silence, his gaze unreadable. “And if the Council discovers this?”

Amias’s answer is grim. “They will call for a trial. Or worse, a purge.”

My voice is steady when I speak. “Then they can’t discover it. Not yet.”

Elias finally lifts his head, his lips brushing my skin as he whispers, raw and resolute, “They can’t have you. I won’t let them.”

Villin meets Amias’s eyes across the table. “Then we make sure they never try.”

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## CELESTE

The table in Villin’s study wasn’t built for this. It was made for battle maps, for strategies drawn in ink and blood, not the slow tightening of a political noose.

Yet here we are.

I sit at the head, the fire behind me throwing long shadows across the wood. Elias sits on my left, Amias on my right. Andrei lingers near the bookshelf, half in shadow, arms crossed, his stare sharp and unreadable. Villin leans against the stone mantel, watching all of us like we’re pieces on a board he doesn’t quite trust.

“The Council meeting is in two days,” I say at last. My voice cleaves the silence. “Until then, we’re under house arrest. That gives us time, time to prepare, and to decide what they will see and what they will not.”

“And what they’ll believe,” Amias adds, his fingers drumming once against the table before stilling.

Villin’s gaze sharpens. “The mark stays hidden. That isn’t up for debate.”

I incline my head. “We glamor it. Mask it. No one sees the bite.”

Elias doesn’t speak, but his hand finds mine beneath the table, his thumb steady against my knuckles.

Andrei finally shifts, pushing away from the shelves. “If they sense a change in Celeste’s aura, hiding the mark will not matter. Someone will notice. They always do.”

“I accounted for that,” Amias replies. “I can weave a masking charm. It will not erase the resonance, but it will dull the edges. Subtle enough to carry us through the hearing.”

“You can do that?” I ask.

His smile is faint, shadowed by weariness. “It will cost me, but it will work.”

Villin straightens from the mantel, his silver eyes steady. “Then we decide who speaks for us. Who controls the narrative?”

“Me.” The answer leaves me without hesitation.

Four pairs of eyes turn toward me.

“I am the center of this Axis. I am the reason they fear us. No one else can speak for me.”

Elias tightens his hold on my hand. “You don’t have to carry it alone.”

“I know,” I say softly. “But I will be the one they listen to.”

Amias inclines his head. “Then you set the tone. You stepped into a sacred ritual and rewrote its rules. They will demand answers, and they will demand them from you.”

“They will expect weakness,” Villin says, his voice low. “Do not give it to them.”

Andrei moves closer to the firelight, his expression unyielding. “You have already survived what they cannot even imagine. Let them see that.”

The room hums with a quiet resolve that seems to rise around me like a shield. Slowly, I rise, and every gaze follows.

“This is our strategy,” I say. “We do not enter that chamber as the accused. We enter as the wronged. What William attempted was not only a violation, it was treason.”

Villin steps closer, pride sharpening his tone. “Then we make them see you not as a danger but as a survivor who turned his weapon into strength.”

“And we use that strength to bring him down,” I finish.

Amias studies me for a long moment. “We will need more than a story. We will need to look untouchable. Unbreakable. United.”

“We are,” Elias murmurs, quiet but unwavering.

Andrei’s mouth curves slightly, a rare flicker of approval. “Then we make them believe it.”

My hand drifts to my neck, brushing the place where Elias marked me. The bond hums beneath my skin, undeniable and dangerous. I don’t regret it, but the weight of it presses heavily already, a cost waiting to be called.

“Two days,” I say into the silence. “Let them come.”

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## ANDREI

She is outside again. I find her on the back terrace, barefoot on the frozen stone, her gaze fixed on the forest. The sky hangs heavy with snow that hasn’t fallen yet, the kind that waits for quiet before it drops. The wind cuts across the clearing, sharp enough to scrape through bone, yet she doesn’t move. Her arms are bare, her skin kissed red by cold, but she remains perfectly still.

She looks as though she belongs in winter. As if the frost itself might have carved her.

But I go to her anyway.

“You’ll freeze,” I say quietly.

She doesn’t turn. “I won’t. Not with everything burning inside me.”

The words stop me where I stand. Because I know that fire. I’ve carried it from the moment she walked through the gates of Axis, shivering, silent, defiant.

Careful, I step closer anyway. Not because she is fragile, but because I am tired of pretending that distance makes anything easier.

“You always walk barefoot into the cold when your thoughts get too loud,” I say.

This time, she glances back. Just enough for our eyes to meet. Just enough to split something open inside me.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” she asks.

My breath spills in a white cloud between us. A hundred reasons come to mind. Because Elias is always quicker. Because Villin claimed pieces of her that I thought I might deserve. Because I was too late.

But none of that belongs here.

“The first time I saw you,” I begin, voice unsteady, “you were standing in Villin’s kitchen. Your eyes were wide, as if you couldn’t decide whether to run or scream. You looked like you didn’t belong to anyone. Not even yourself.”

Her lashes tremble. The wind pushes strands of hair across her face, tangling them in pale light.

“I felt it then,” I go on. “That pull. Heavy. Unfair. Like something ancient stirring in my chest. I walked away because if I stayed and you left, it would break me in ways I couldn’t mend.”

She turns fully now, her skin raw with cold, her eyes unguarded. She has never looked more real. Never more like someone I would set fire to the world for.

“And now?” she asks.

Now.

Now I dream of her voice in silence. I watch her give pieces of herself to them, and I can’t resent her for it. But I have carried this ache too long, pressed hard against my ribs, and it refuses to leave me.

I close the space between us.

“Now I know you’re not going anywhere,” I tell her. “And I’m done waiting for the perfect moment.”

She meets me halfway without hesitation. When her fingers brush mine, something inside me steadies. Not because the ache is gone, but because she chooses to stand here with me.

“You’ve bled for us,” I say. “You’ve stepped into every fire we were too afraid to face. And even after Elias. Even after Villin. I still feel it. That gravity. That tether.”

Her voice is soft, fragile yet unshaken. “So what do we do with it?”

I breathe her in, her warmth, her light, the pieces no one has ever managed to break.

“I make it right,” I answer. “However long it takes. However you’ll let me.”

Her hand slips fully into mine, as though it always belonged there.

“I never stopped seeing you,” she whispers.

The words undo me.

I close my eyes and let them settle deep—her voice, her presence, the truth I have waited too long to hear.

“Good,” I murmur, pulling her closer. “Because I never stopped waiting.”

She doesn’t pull away.

And in the silence, as snow finally begins to fall around us, I let myself believe I haven’t lost her. Not yet.

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## CELESTE

The house is too quiet. Even with four men moving through it, and goddess, I can feel every one of them now, it’s the silence that devours me. Not the cold. Not the shadow of what is coming. The quiet. The waiting.

I stand before the tall mirror in Villin’s bedroom and study the stranger staring back. The red dress clings without mercy, stiletto heels lengthening my silhouette until I look taller, sharper, carved from intention. My hair falls in dark waves, my lips painted the color of blood. Entirely wrong for an Alaskan winter. Perfect for what the Council demands.

This is war, and I am dressing for it.

Behind me, the room is dim, lit only by a single candle. Anticipation hums against the silence. My fingers tremble as I smooth the fabric over my hips.

They say the ritual will happen on my twenty-fifth birthday, the moment midnight passes. They call it tradition. A vampire born, not turned, must be awakened in blood. A ceremonial act, brutal and ancient. William, my

father, will drive an enchanted onyx blade through my heart to ignite the spark of immortality that has slept inside me since birth.

They call that normal.

Nothing about me is normal.

I am a witch through my father's line, a vampire through my mother's blood, an inheritance he could never corrupt. Two of my Echoes are vampires as well. Elias and Andrei, bound by resonance, marked by fate. That changes everything.

One born vampire is rare. A born vampire with an Axis of five, two of them carrying fangs and immortality, is something else entirely. Not just power. Imbalance. And the world fears imbalance more than anything.

The Council will not care about birthright, nor that William rules them through greed. What matters is what I have become. What am I becoming? No one has seen it before, because no one ever intended it to exist.

This house arrest is not caution, it's containment.

I adjust a strap. The mirror catches a faint glint at my throat, a bruise hidden beneath glamour. Elias's mark. I let him bite me. I wanted it. The power not only bound us; it changed us. If the Council discovers what that bite could mean for the Axis, for the ritual, for the foundations they worship, they will try to kill me. They will try to kill us.

But it is already too late.

They gave me time. They gave us space to become something they cannot define, predict, or control.

The floorboards creak behind me, a low warning that pulls the air taut around us. I do not move, do not look back, but the bond surges through me, fierce and alive, as if he is already at my side.

"You are not wearing a coat," Villin says from the doorway.

“I am not dressing for the snow.”

I meet my own eyes in the mirror. I am not dressing for warmth or modesty. I am dressing for a room that intends to dismantle me before I speak.

I leave the mirror and descend toward the stairs, each step a quiet rehearsal. My heels strike the hardwood in a clean rhythm that cuts through the night like a blade. Villin falls in beside me in dark layers, gloved hands loose at his sides. He has said little since I left his bed. He does not need to. His presence is a shield.

The others wait in the kitchen.

Amias leans against the counter in a pressed black shirt, arms folded. Elias and Andrei face each other across the island, tension humming between them. The air is thick with the bitter scent of coffee.

All three look up as I enter.

Elias freezes first, his gaze flicking to my throat. Possession sparks in his eyes before he reins it in. Andrei follows, jaw tight, expression unreadable. Amias watches both of them for a moment before settling his attention on me.

“You’re wearing *that* to the meeting?” he asks, gesturing in my direction.

“They already see me as a threat,” I reply. “I may as well look the part.”

He only nods, as if he understands without judgment.

Villin pours a cup of coffee and slides it to me, then turns his attention to the room. “We don’t have long. The Council expects a united front, not a spectacle.”

“What do we tell them?” Elias asks, voice rougher today.

“If the glamour fails, we frame the mark as an accident of resonance,” Amias says. “A side effect neither of you could control.”

“You want us to lie,” Elias mutters.

“I want us to survive,” Amias replies.

Elias opens his mouth to argue, but I raise a hand. “He’s right. If they believe the bond mutated by intent, they will panic. They will see it as a weapon.”

“It is a weapon,” Andrei mutters.

I meet his eyes. “Then we do not let them see that.”

Amias steps forward, hands braced on the counter. “The goal is not denial. It’s narrative. We emphasize stability. We show them that despite the unusual formation of this Axis, we are aligned, capable, *balanced*.”

“They will still be afraid,” Elias says, a shadow of doubt in his voice.

“Good,” Villin replies. “Fear keeps them careful. What we cannot give them is chaos. If any of us fractures, they will use it to break Celeste.”

Amias nods once. “They expect a girl who can’t be contained, a fractured Axis, a ritual with no precedent, and William as the only lawful anchor.”

“We don’t give them that story,” I say. “We give them one they can live with.”

Andrei’s brow rises. “Which is?”

“That the ritual will proceed. That I will accept the blade. That I will awaken by their rules. That I command my Echoes and that William’s blood still governs me.”

Villin’s eyes narrow, and Elias frowns. “None of that is true.”

“No,” I admit, calmly. “But it buys us time.”

“Time is enough.” Amias’s mouth curves in a faint, approving smile.

Andrei inclines his head. “We will play our part.”

Elias meets my gaze, a long, taut moment. Then he exhales and nods. “I will follow your lead.”

Something inside me unclenches.

“We walk in together,” I say. “No hesitation. No cracks. They want to see uncertainty. We give them unity.”

Villin studies me. “And after?”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “Then we burn it down.”

No one argues. The silence thickens with intent.

I step onto the teleportation stone set into the kitchen floor. It hums beneath my heel, the air tightening around us as light wraps us in cold, ancient energy. It is colder than Villin’s portals, older than any sigil I've studied. It feels controlled, impersonal, and familiar at the same time.

We land in the Resonance Hall beneath a sky of enchanted stars. The chamber is circular, carved deep into the foundation of Axis Spire. Incense and the scent of old magic cling to the stone, pressing against me as I step forward.

At the center of the chamber sits an oval table of polished obsidian, its surface so dark it seems to drink the light from the air. From a distance, it shimmers like water, a mirror that pretends at fluidity. Up close, the illusion dissolves and the names carved into each seat rise in stark relief, deep and enduring, a monument to ego and the illusion of control.

Villin’s chair sits empty. Today, he is not a Councilman, only a witness. There is no chair for my mother, no crest, no space at all. Elmaris has no seat here unless I carve it myself.

I walk forward, heels clicking across the stone floor, steady and deliberate. Villin, Amias, Elias, and Andrei fall into line behind me, all dressed in black. Not uniforms, not matching, but chosen with purpose. Men you do not challenge. Yet I am the one they fear.

Robert White rises as we near the table, expression solemn, not unkind. Amias's father. He inclines his head. "Lady Celeste."

He is the one who pressed for neutrality, who brought three delegates from the European headquarters. I nod in return, wary but grateful. Allies are limited.

To his right sits Kith El'Mara, draped in velvet and rings, eyes bright with calculation. Beside him, my father, William. He does not rise. Fingers laced, he watches me as though I am a problem to dissect. John Willson leans to murmur something at his shoulder; William does not answer. I cannot tell whether I hate him more for what he has done or for the bored disinterest in his gaze.

Across the table, the European delegates sit rigid, disciplined. A tall woman with a scar beneath her eye. A man with dark skin and a spine like a spear. An elder with a braided white beard strung with copper rings. They do not smile. They do not bow. They watch.

Robert gestures to the far side of the table. "Stand at the center. The hearing is not yet formal. We begin shortly."

Villin takes his place beside me, not behind, not ahead. Beside. "Breathe," he murmurs. "Do not bow."

"My hands are shaking," I whisper.

"You already are doing this," he says. His fingers brush mine briefly, grounding me. Amias's presence anchors my shoulder, steady and unwavering. Elias stands to my left, watching William with a restraint that hums with threat. Andrei locks eyes with John Willson, memorizing every twitch of his mouth.

They are here because of me. No, they are here with me. That is what matters.

The mark at my neck throbs faintly beneath glamour. The bite that changed everything. Not all of them know it exists. Not yet.

Robert's voice cuts through the silence. "This is not a preliminary review. This is a trial."

Kith scoffs. "It is damage control."

For the first time, something flickers in William's eyes, not rage, but calculation.

I lift my chin. I will not tremble for him. Not again.

"Let us begin," Robert says. He sits deliberately, palms pressed to the obsidian. "Proceed with clarity. Lady Celeste Nightmoor, daughter of Commander William Nightmoor and heir of Elmaris, stands as bearer of a semi-completed Axis."

Kith does not wait. "An Axis of three vampires."

The words fall like a blade.

"Two," Robert corrects. "Lady Celeste has not yet undergone the Awakening."

"Yet," John Willson echoes, thinly pleased. "In less than a day, she completes. Then it is three."

My nails bite into my palms. They speak as if I am a weapon set to detonate, as if I chose any of this.

William leans forward, voice smooth with practiced control. "You know the laws. Vampire lineages are too unstable to dominate Axis formations. Two is rare. Three is impossible. One is born," he glances at Elias, "another is his twin," he gestures to Andrei. "The structure will not hold."

"Cannot or will not," Robert says. "Depending on who wishes to control it."

“This is not fear,” Kith snaps. “This is precedent. Never in our history has an Axis formed with three vampiric signatures. It is not eccentric. It is unnatural.”

Amias steps forward, calm as frost. “Unnatural, or inconvenient?”

Kith’s eyes narrow. “Do not play coy, boy. You understand what this means. Power shifts. Imbalance. A breach in containment. One councilman bound to her,” he tilts his head at Villin, “and another,” a sharp jab of his finger toward Amias, “heir to Councilman White.”

John’s voice hardens. “Which means the Council now sits inside her Axis. Two heirs and a councilman bound to a half-blood whose ritual is incomplete, whose allegiances are uncertain, and whose father failed to prevent this.” Each word drips with careful contempt.

The room falls into a charged silence.

“You speak of allegiance,” I finally say, voice steady, “but you mean control. You do not fear my Axis. You fear that I built it without your permission.”

Kith’s mouth thins. “Do not presume to know what I fear, girl.”

“But I do,” I reply. “You fear that the world is changing and that your table will not survive it.”

“Your Axis is a threat,” William interjects, voice smooth and practiced.

“To whom?” I ask, head held high. “To you? Or to the lie this Council has preserved for centuries, that vampires are unstable and unfit. You can't claim I am heir to your chair and then deny what I am.”

He says nothing. His jaw ticks in quiet calculation.

Amias folds his arms across his chest, every line of his body controlled, his voice even but carrying the weight of something lethal. “If it’s power that frightens you, then say it plainly. Do not hide behind the word balance.

You have no wish for equilibrium. What you want is to remain untouchable. The moment she survived that ritual, the balance was never yours to claim again."

John leans back, studying me with a measured gaze. "You think the world will accept this? A royal hybrid with a vampire-heavy Axis, one councilman, two heirs. You think she is a symbol?"

Before I can answer, Robert speaks. "Yes. Perhaps it is time we had one."

The words hang heavy in the chamber. A symbol. A warning. A weapon. They have not yet decided which one I will be.

The starlight enchantments flicker overhead. The obsidian glints like still water. There is no seat for my mother. There is no place for me unless I carve it out with my own hands.

My hands tremble. I lift my head, trying to embody the woman I was born to be, the queen my mother might have wanted me to become. But grief flows through me like winter, cold and unrelenting. Not fear. Not anymore. Grief for the lives that could have been. For a magic split open, loud as thunder. For a body that carries two natures that never asked to be reconciled. For four men who did not ask to bear the storm I bring.

Andrei. Elias. Villin. Amias.

I glance back. Elias is unreadable, jaw tight. Andrei's arms are crossed, body coiled, ready to strike if William gives him the slightest excuse. Villin looks at me directly, not through me, not past me, but at me, as if every fractured piece is exactly what he expected. Amias rests a hand at the small of my back, grounding me.

Kith's voice cuts through the air. "We will take a recess. Thirty minutes. When we reconvene, we cast our initial votes."

Initial. The word tightens around my chest like a rope.

Chairs scrape against stone. Robes whisper over the floor. No one meets my eyes except Robert, whose small nod feels like a promise that at least one voice has not turned.

William moves toward the door, flanked on either side by Kith and John, their steps echoing in perfect unison. He doesn't spare me a single glance, as if I am less than an afterthought. My stomach twists, a hollow ache cutting deeper with every pace he puts between us. He should have protected me, should have stood at my side, even if only when the doors were closed and no one else could see.

"Celeste," Villin says softly as the chamber empties, "you do not have to hold it together."

"I do," I answer. "If I don't, they win."

"They are already losing," Amias murmurs. "They do not know it yet."

It does not feel like victory. It feels like standing at the edge of a cliff, wind roaring in my ears, every path forward carved from bone.

"I do not want to be a symbol," I admit. "I wanted to live."

Elias steps closer. "You did more than live. You changed the game."

I huff a breath that is almost a laugh. "And now we wait to see if they let us keep playing."

For a brief moment, the chamber is ours, my Axis, my beautiful chaos, my miracle that refuses to bow down to anyone.

"I need a minute," I say. "Alone."

Villin does not argue. Amias only nods. One by one, they leave, giving me what no one else at this table has ever offered—*space*.

I stand in the center of the hall. The sigils beneath my feet hum with memory. This is where I claimed them. This is where I chose. If they force me to choose again, I will choose them still.

Even if the Council does not understand.

Even if the world burns for it.

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## CELESTE

The resonance chamber feels colder when they return. The Council files back to their seats, faces set in the masks of centuries, entitlement pressed into every line. My heels click across the stone as I take the center once more. My Axis falls into formation: Villin to my right, Amias and Elias to my left, Andrei a step behind, silent and poised like a drawn blade.

Robert White rises. “As required by Council law, the matter of Celeste Nightmoor’s Axis, comprising Commander Saint Villin, Amias White, Elias Dragovici, and Andrei Dragovici, has been reviewed.” He lets the words linger. “A vote was cast. The majority upholds its legitimacy.”

I blink. My pulse stumbles, then surges.

Robert’s voice hardens. “The Axis is recognized as stable, magically valid, and bound under the resonance rites. No further inquiry will be pursued regarding its composition or balance.”

William springs to his feet so fast his chair topples backward. “This is insanity.”

“Sit down,” Robert commands, his voice unyielding.

Kith El’Mara’s lip curls. “Her Axis is a hybrid aberration, and she is bound to two vampires.” He turns on me. “You are a liability. Those twins were meant to be watched, not elevated.”

John Willson leans forward. “This is a powder keg. You are legitimizing a time bomb.”

Robert lifts a hand, and the room stills. “We are honoring the laws you have upheld for centuries. The ritual was valid. The resonance held. The Echoes were chosen by the Goddess, not by bloodlines or strategy.”

William’s voice slides lower, venomous and measured. “She is my daughter.”

“And this Council no longer recognizes your claim to authority over her,” Robert replies evenly. “You forfeited that when you attempted to bind her by force.”

My knees threaten to buckle. Villin’s fingers brush mine, steadying me. Barely a touch, yet more than enough.

Robert continues. “The Council will draft an oversight agreement to observe the Axis Nightmoor during the transition period following Celeste Nightmoor’s Awakening.”

Kith slams a fist against the obsidian table. “She is becoming something none of us understands. Something no one should be.”

Robert’s gaze does not waver. “Then we will learn, or we will be left behind.”

John opens his mouth to argue, but Robert cuts him off. “The vote stands. This session is adjourned.”

A bell tolls high in the spire. One clear note. Final.

William storms out without a glance in my direction. His robes snap like thunder in his wake. Kith and John follow, whispering their next move. They do not look victorious. They look afraid.

I expected triumph. Instead, there is only quiet. Not relief, not yet. Just a fragile stillness in the space that panic once occupied.

Villin is already beside me, his gaze locked on mine. Behind him, Elias and Andrei flank Amias, forming a protective wall.

“They cannot undo us,” I whisper.

“No,” Villin replies. “They will try.”

I nod. I believe it too. For tonight, we are still standing. Together. That is enough.

***

The cold bites sharper in the Southern Garden.

We move in silence through frost and skeletal roses, snow whispering beneath our shoes. There is no real path; only drowned paving stones and trellises clawing at the sky. It should feel dead, but the air hums. The longer we walk, the more I sense something alive beneath the ice.

Robert sets a measured pace a few strides ahead, hands folded behind his back. His posture is perfect, jaw tight. His eyes flick to me now and then, like I am fragile and flammable all at once.

He stops at a low marble bench near a broken arch swallowed in shadow. “They will not accept the verdict,” he says.

“We know,” Villin answers.

“They will challenge it in shadows, not in chambers. They will wait for one misstep.”

“Let them,” Andrei says from behind me. “We have survived worse.”

I glance at Amias. Calm on the surface. Anything but beneath it.

“They are afraid of imbalance,” I say.

“No,” Robert replies, locking eyes with me. “They are afraid of you. You broke rules they never questioned. You became something that does not exist in their books. You carry royal blood they tried to erase, and you bonded with two vampires, a councilman, and a councilman’s heir. That makes you powerful. That makes you dangerous.”

“I did not choose any of it,” I whisper.

“No,” he agrees. “You walked into the ritual anyway. Magic does not care about intention. It answers to truth.”

The wind lifts my hair and slices through my dress like a blade. Beyond Robert, the air shimmers where the portal lies hidden, a heat-haze clinging to the ice. The magic there is restless. It calls to something in me.

“Is it still sealed?” I ask.

He hesitates. “Yes. For now. The verdict bought time, not safety.”

“How much time?” Villin asks.

“Enough to prepare,” Robert says. “Barely.” He looks at Amias. “Keep her grounded. Keep her focused. When that seal breaks, everything that happened today will mean nothing unless she is ready to stand.”

Robert draws a long breath, each word measured. “Your mark changed everything, Elias.”

“I know,” Elias answers quietly, unwavering.

“You gave her your lifespan. Your line. It altered the Axis. Do you understand what that means?”

“I did not think,” he says, voice tight. “She was bleeding. I could not…” The rest dies in his throat.

“She is already different,” Amias says. “We all feel it.”

Robert’s attention settles on me again. “You are a storm. That is your power and your curse. You were meant to be forged in fire and sacrifice. This Council and this world will try to chain you with names and laws. Do not let them define you.”

“What am I then?” The question slips out softer than I intended.

He shifts closer. “You are Elmaris. You are what they tried to bury. You are the reason there is still hope.”

No one speaks.

Villin sets his palm at the small of my back. “We will be ready,” he says.

Robert nods once. “Then start.”

Heat coils under my ribs. I lift my chin. “Let them come,” I say. “I will show them what it means to fear what they tried to erase.”

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## CELESTE

Robert White's words echo inside me long after he is gone. *You are Elmaris. You are the reason there is still hope.*

We retrace our steps through the southern garden, frost crunching beneath our shoes and skeletal roses clawing at a sky too gray for snow. Elias keeps close, his fingers brushing mine as if to tether me to this world. Villin leads ahead, shoulders set like steel. Amias scans the treeline, eyes sharp, every muscle ready. Andrei lingers behind, silent, a living shadow.

Shapes emerge from the trees without warning, shadows stretching and shifting as if the darkness itself has taken form. William steps forward first, every movement deliberate, eyes bright with cold intent that cuts through the frost like a blade. Kith and John follow close behind, moving with predatory precision, silent as death and just as certain. The garden holds its breath. No guards, no decree, no warning bells—only the weight of blood and purpose pressing down on the air. Even the wind seems to hesitate, caught in the stillness, as if it knows what is coming. My pulse hammers in my ears.

Villin stumbles under the force of William’s arrival, crashing into the frozen hedges with a sharp spray of snow and ice. Twigs snap and frost flutters down like shattered glass. Amias grabs my arm, fingers digging into Elias's coat sleeve as he tries to pull me back, but the surge of power pushes us forward despite his grip. The garden itself seems to shiver, as if the very earth senses the return of a force long denied, frost trembling along every branch and stone. My heart pounds in my chest, a frantic echo of the chaos unfolding around us.

“I warned you,” William says, each word thick with venom. “You were never meant to rule.”

Villin pushes to his feet, blood streaking his temple, snow clinging to his hair. “You are breaking Council law,” he shouts, voice tight with fury.

William sneers. “And who will stop me. You?”

The garden erupts.

Andrei and Elias move as one, fluid and lethal. Fangs flash, claws rake, bodies collide with speed the human eye could never follow. Kith and John stagger under the onslaught, their strikes glancing off the twins before they are hurled into the hedges.

Amias meets William’s first blow, his blade catching what little light the sky allows. The impact of that enchanted steel sends a shock through me. William’s counterstrike lashes out in a burst of death magic and sends Amias skidding across the snow. Cold fire ripples through my chest and steals my breath.

“You think a vote changes anything.” William advances. “You are nothing without the power I allowed you to have.”

“You gave me nothing,” I roar. Flames jump to my hands and spill warmth and light across the frost. “I survived in spite of you.”

He drives through the blaze, coat smoldering, eyes wild with decades of entitlement and rage. I see the dagger in his grip, a jagged onyx ritual blade, ancient, older than the Council itself. It should have marked my Awakening. In his hand, it's only a weapon.

Magic slams between us. His ice meets my fire, and the world hisses and sparks. My lungs burn, my body strains, but I will not yield. He has had decades to master his power. I have had months. I will not falter.

We circle toward the archway where the sealed portal hums beneath the frost. Each step makes the stones tremble, alive with anticipation.

"Celeste," William says, voice low and dangerous. "You could have ruled beside me."

"Not as your puppet."

"Then not at all."

The blade arcs. Too fast. Too cruel.

It pierces my chest.

Pain tears through me, white hot and all-consuming. Light and venom flood my veins. My knees hit the snow. My scream disappears into the cold.

Through the haze, I see Elias. His roar splits the garden, raw, ragged, and inhuman, shaking the frost from the branches. Shadows coil and writhe around him like living smoke as he tears across the distance with terrifying speed. His hands clamp around William's throat, strength and fury fused into a single motion. There is a crack of bone, sharp and final, and my father crumples to the ground. Even as he falls, I know with a sinking certainty that death alone will not hold him.

Kith and John vanish into the trees, their intent shattered by the chaos.

Villin drops to my side and clamps his hands over the wound. Rage and fear twist his features. Amias kneels opposite, chanting, his voice tugging at

the frayed threads of my life. Elias staggers near, eyes burning crimson, fangs still wet. Andrei stands over us, coiled and alert.

“Celeste, stay with me.” Villin’s voice breaks.

Blood slicks my lips, thick and metallic, burning my tongue as it slides. The dagger pulses deep in my chest, a heartbeat of hunger that digs into my ribs, tearing at muscle and bone. Pain flares through me in jagged waves, each pulse unraveling me from the inside, my vision blurring at the edges as the world tilts and shifts around me.

Beneath us, runes carved into the garden flare gold and thrum with my heartbeat. The portal answers, trembling and close to breaking. The magic lifts me before I can collapse. Light surges through my veins and pulls me upward.

“Celeste.” Villin’s fear tears the word in two.

Elias reaches for me, and the flare throws him back. Amias shields his eyes. Andrei does not move, horror carved into every line of his face.

I am weightless. I am fire. I am light.

I wanted more time.

More time with my Axis.

The last thing I see is Elias’s face, broken and raw. Villin’s outstretched hand. Amias bent in the snow, helpless. Andrei, standing guard and shaking.

The light devours everything.

And I am gone.

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## Author’s Note

If you’ve made it here, to the final page of Sanctified Echoes, I want to pause and thank you.

Writing this book was more than putting words on a page. It was a fight, a risk, and a piece of myself I chose to share. Celeste’s journey is hers, but in every broken piece, in every choice to rise again, there’s a reflection of something I believe deeply.

We’re all born with a spark inside us. A pulse of strength, small and wild. But it isn’t enough to simply have it. Life tests us. Life breaks us. We hit the ground, again and again, and in those moments we decide—rise, or stay down. And every rise shapes us into something stronger. That’s resilience.

Celeste falls. She bleeds. She carries scars. But she never bows. And if there’s one message I hope lingers after you close this book, it’s this: you, too, can rise. Even if it feels impossible. Even if the world tells you otherwise. You are already stronger than you know.

To my husband: thank you for being my constant, my foundation, and the one who believed in me when I doubted myself. Without your love and

patience, these pages would never have come to life.

And to you, dear reader: thank you for stepping into the shadows with me. This is only the beginning—for Celeste, and for me. There are more battles ahead, more love, more fury, more fire. And I am beyond grateful you chose to walk with me through this first step.

With love, resilience, and fire,

L.A. MARIN

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## About the author

L.A. Marin writes dark reverse harem where gothic academies, forbidden rituals, and obsessive love collide. She believes in heroines who refuse to bow and in stories that linger long after the last page.

When she is not lost in fictional worlds, she is usually savoring a strong black espresso, brewing green tea, or being bossed around by her two cats.

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